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**European influence and tribal society in Tunisia during
the nineteenth century: the origins and impact of the
trade in esparto grass 1870-1940**

by

Gavin McQuarrie

**A Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

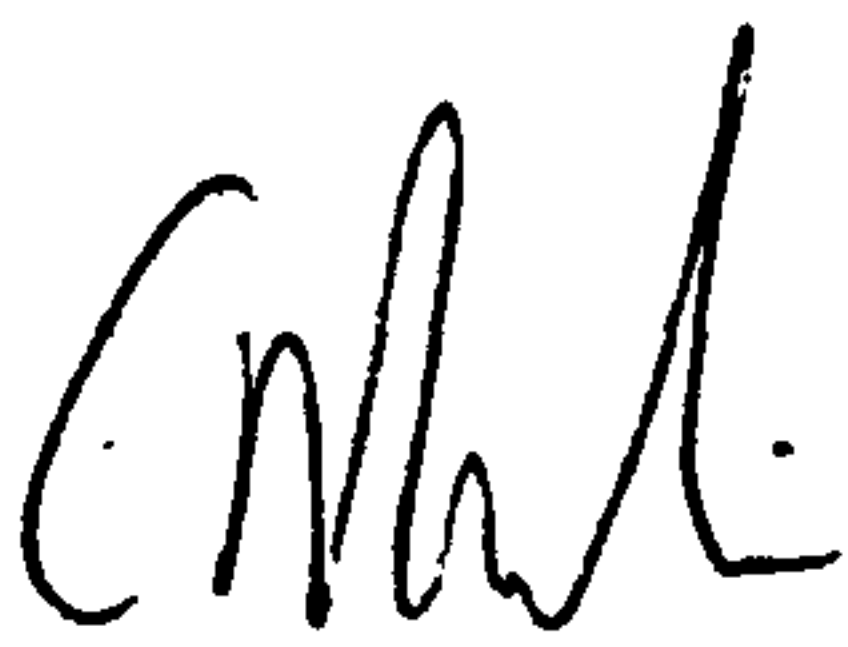
**Department of Geography
University of Durham
June 1995**



4 JUL 1996

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to examine the specific circumstances surrounding the development of a trade in alfa, or esparto, grass, between Britain and southern Tunisia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Beginning abruptly in 1871, within the space of ten years alfa grass had become not only the principal item of foreign trade in the south but also one of the whole country's most important exports. What differentiates the alfa trade from existing commercial activities in Tunisia at the time is that it was carried on between European merchants and the inhabitants of districts which were only marginally integrated into the political structures of the central government and the externally orientated market economy of the coastal and urban regions. A mainly pastoral and overwhelmingly subsistence orientated population, the tribes of south and central Tunisia were, on the surface, an unlikely labour force for the collection and sale of a plant which was laborious and time consuming to gather, and whose sale offered what were often extremely meagre returns. In attempting to understand and explain how and why a people, hitherto largely unconnected with and uninterested in direct, market orientated transactions within Tunisia, should enter into economic relations of such magnitude with European industrialists, the study has highlighted a number of interesting issues relating to the penetration of capitalism into what is commonly termed the periphery. Although many of the findings may be specific to Tunisia it is clear that the alfa trade there emerged as a result of a complex interplay of local, regional and international factors which had some surprising origins and some interesting results.

Although fulfilling many of the criteria for Myint's "vent-for-surplus" theory of international trade, the alfa trade in Tunisia neither caused any far reaching social change nor did it result in any independent and self-sustaining economic development in the south of the country. Indeed the alfa trade helped mask, and undoubtedly prolonged, the growing economic and social crisis in southern Tunisia as the region underwent a painful integration into the developing national economy. With little to offer the country in terms of natural resources southern Tunisia was sucked dry of its surplus wealth yet deprived of any corresponding investment.

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Glossary

Achour	Tax on grain crops
Beylerby	Provincial Governor of the Ottoman Empire
Caid	Regional Governor invested with Beylical Government authority over a territorial area or specific tribes
Cantar	Unit of measurement equivalent to 51kg, also known as quintal
Corsair	Pirate ship
Djerid	Region around the Chotts (or salt lakes) in the south
Ittifaq	Political or administrative rights granted by the Bey either by special prerogative or to the highest bidder
Janissery Corp	Turkish military forces stationed in Tunisia
Kanoun	Tax on olive crops
Khammes	Share cropper working the land for the owner normally with rights to a percentage of the crop
Lezzam	Holder of rights purchased under a lizma contract
Lizma	The granting of economic, for example tax or market, rights by the Beylicate to the highest bidder
Mahalla	The name given to the annual or bi-annual caravans composed of military forces despatched into the interior principally to collect taxes
Medjba	Fixed tax on all adult males
Piastre	Unit of currency phased by the French with the introduction of the Franc
Quintal	Metric quintal equivalent to 100kg.
Sahel	A narrow coastal belt running from the south of Tunis to the south of Sousse
Tell	Northern regions of the country of more temperate climate
Teskeres	Bonds bought from the Government which gave rights to export

Preface

The inspiration for this research was kindled during my days as an undergraduate at Glasgow University where I took a joint honours degree in geography and economic history. Although the range of topics covered was broad and general, the courses which interested me most were those which focused on the economic and social development of non-European countries, particularly in Africa. Of greatest interest to me was the period immediately before and during the colonial era of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a time of such fundamental political, social and economic change both for Africa and Europe. I was eager to find out more about the nature of pre-colonial Africa, its society and internal dynamics and how these were influenced by greater integration into the developing world political economy. The immense volume and breadth of coverage of the available literature was fascinating and exciting: so many countries, such varied topics and viewpoints. But it was also frustrating. Many of the studies I read seemed to follow rigid linguistic and/or nationalistic boundaries. British and American researchers concentrated on British colonial possessions while French Africa appeared to be the preserve of French researchers. Translations, at least into English, seemed to be few and far between.

In addition I began to feel strongly that much of the available work was written by Europeans from a standpoint of what Europe (or capitalism) did to Africa, whether positive or negative. Often little or no history was granted to African countries prior to the European advance of the nineteenth century and the dynamic of change was almost exclusively provided by Europe. Although there could be little doubt as to the significance of the European side of the equation I wanted to ensure that local factors were given equal weight in any of my own research.

The initial research topic began quite simply, and quite vaguely, as a study of British capitalism in a French colonial territory. Although unable to speak French I was determined to steer clear of British colonial possessions in Africa. I chose Tunisia partly because of the importance of British trade along the southern shores of the Mediterranean and partly because the prospect of researching in Libya seemed



somewhat less than inviting. In addition few books I had read mentioned Tunisia at all.

As time went by and I became clearer on what primary material was likely to be available I focused more on the British traders in the south of the country where Maltese (officially under British jurisdiction) influence was strong. Later it became apparent from reading through British Foreign Office records that during the mid to late nineteenth century British traders predominated in the south of the country most particularly in a new trade which developed from 1870 in alfa or esparto grass. Importantly from my point of view this trade was carried on with the tribes of the south and central interior of the country. This I found extremely interesting since the only knowledge I had of north African tribes came from E.E. Pritchard's works which had highlighted the inherently egalitarian aspects of their social structure. This puzzled me and made me determined to find out not only how and why the trade in alfa grass developed in the first place, but also what impact this had on existing social structures of the indigenous, nomadic populations of the country. I therefore refined the research topic to be a study of the tribes of south and central Tunisia with particular reference to the trade in alfa grass from its inception until the 1940's. Although I would have preferred to go beyond 1940 this end date was dictated by the fact that after this date material on alfa grass in the Tunisian Government Archives at the Dar el Bey can no longer be found in discrete files. Given the time constraints of my research it became impossible to extend the study by attempting to review information across a whole series of files which were poorly indexed.

The study was to be broadly an analysis at a national and international level examining the relations of the government of Tunis with the major Powers on a political and economic level and geographically how this influenced local level integration into the world economy. Also of interest was what underpinned Tunisian society in the pre-colonial era, and how this changed as a result of foreign intervention.

The best starting point for primary source material in English, at least for the period prior to 1900, is without doubt the Foreign Office archives at Kew in London. The Consular records are comprehensive and well maintained. The most useful sources

were the commercial records FO 335 and the political memoranda FO 102. These included reports from the main Consulate in Tunis to the Foreign Office in London as well as a wide variety of reports and submissions from the vice-consulates and consular offices around the country to the Consul General in Tunis. Most of the trade and commercial reports are also found reprinted in British Parliamentary Papers (BPP) which are readily available on microfiche. The comprehensive and wide ranging archives of the French Foreign Office held at the Quai d'Orsay in Paris are also well maintained and of easy access although time constraints meant that this author was unable to extract the maximum value from this source.

A further useful source of background information on the tribes at the time of the establishment of the French Protectorate are held in the archives of the Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre at Vincennes on the outskirts of Paris.

The records of the French army and Bureau des Affaires Indigènes in Aix-en-Provence provided little information of direct benefit to this research topic although they would serve a study of the alfa trade in Algeria .

The final source of primary data, and of particular use in the later period were the Archives Générales Tunisiennes at the Dar el Bey in Tunis which also contain copies of correspondence and reports of the French Administration in Tunisia. These, however, were the least well organised archives consulted and the most difficult in which to work efficiently. The Israeli bombing of the PLO headquarters in Tunis followed by American air raids of Libya, both of which occurred during my research in Tunisia, made working in the Dar el Bey considerably more difficult.

The trade in alfa grass is without doubt one of the least researched topics in Tunisian, indeed of north African history in general. One of the reasons for this soon became apparent during my work. There is a great dearth of useful information on the subject, particularly during the early period of the nineteenth century. It may be that the subject was not considered worthy of keeping records and in at least one case whole files concerning Perry Bury in the AGT are empty. Furthermore as the trade was carried

on with Britain and by British subjects in the main documentary evidence in French and Tunisian archives is sparse until the twentieth century. A great deal of reliance was perforce given to British Foreign Office records.

Attempts to contact descendants of Maltese traders and in particular those of William Galea, British Vice-Consul in Sousse and principal trader in the material on his own account and for that of Perry Bury, via advertisements in Maltese and Israeli newspapers proved sadly fruitless. I do however remain convinced that such an avenue of research could prove useful in the future.

Although the books of sederunt of Perry Bury are available at the Board of Trade archives in London, they contain little of interest to researchers of the Company and the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce was unable to provide any information relating to the company's activities. Although the author made frequent use of a number of British periodicals, principally *The Times* and several trade journals of the British paper industry, a great deal of information remains to be culled from these sources and further research may well uncover much more information on the economics of British demand for alfa grass and of individual paper manufacturers which used the material.

While the author has tried to offer some data and interpretation of the alfa trade in the other supplier countries of Spain, Algeria and Tripolitania (Libya), it has been of a relatively superficial nature. Little has been published on the alfa trade in these countries and the scope for a broader comparative analysis of the trade offers tremendous potential for future research.

In the text of this thesis the spelling of the names of places and tribes may vary. Sousse, for example, also appears as Susa and the Fraichice tribe is sometimes spelled as Frechich. Where possible I have used the spelling in source material of those which were used most commonly in the context of time. Thus while Susa was widely used prior to 1881, after the establishment of the French Protectorate the town was almost universally referred to as Sousse.

I would like sincerely to thank the Social Science Research Council for supporting my research both in Britain and overseas. In particular I am deeply indebted to the SSRC for providing me with additional funds which enabled me to return to Tunisia for a short period of time to allow me to complete my study in the archives in Tunis following the difficulties I experienced after the Israeli bombing of the PLO headquarters and the American raids in Libya.

I would also like to thank the University of Durham for its patience and understanding in allowing me an extended period within which to submit this thesis.

I am also extremely grateful to Dr Peter Atkins of Durham University who has been a constant source of wise counsel, support and encouragement throughout the writing of this thesis. Without this and his help and enthusiasm I would not have enjoyed the research as much as I did. Although Doctor Atkins gave me numerous valuable suggestions and advice throughout, I am wholly responsible for any errors or inconsistencies which may appear in the final thesis.

Finally I would like to thank my dear wife Tracey, and son Lewis, for their love and fortitude in what became a much more prolonged enterprise than I had imagined at the outset.

Introduction

The study of the impact on non-capitalist societies of greater integration into the world capitalist economy has been a fundamental preoccupation of both historians and social scientists, particularly since the second world war as decolonisation stimulated a much greater interest in what has become known as the Third World. This has not simply been an academic pursuit. Policy makers have leant heavily on the practical case studies and the theoretical propositions which have emerged from these enquiries to establish and implement economic and development strategies. Obviously there is no one correct solution to the economic and social problems of the less developed countries today but without a strong grounding in theory or a clear understanding of the past any decisions regarding current or future actions on the part of Governments or policy makers are unlikely to meet with success.

Modernization Theory and Dualism

During the 1950's and 1960's much of the research on development conducted within the social sciences and often implicitly accepted by historians, was predicated upon the assumption that the Third World presented an image of the advanced countries' past. All countries could be placed on a linear continuum of development through stages ranging from undeveloped (backward or traditional) to developed (modern). Progression through successive stages could be achieved by the simple acquisition of characteristics of modernity upon which development in the advanced countries had been based.¹ Throughout the social sciences studies were undertaken to identify traditional and modern characteristics of societies, and confirming how the diffusion of modernization would lead to development. Arising at a time when positivism was strong in the social sciences, the use of models and quantitative methods imbued much of their work with a "value free" veneer to its methodology.

¹ Bernstein, H. (1971) "Modernization Theory and the Sociological Study of Development", *Journal of Development Studies*, 7, pp. 141-170.

Geographers though, as ever it seems, belatedly adopted modernization theories enthusiastically, finding in them an opportunity for returning to the fold of mainstream social science and a "suitable" scientific alternative approach with which to lay to rest the ghost of the old regional geography. Maps were produced showing the evolution of urban hierarchies and transport networks through which development diffused and in which it could be measured by the use of a number of indices of modernization.²

In economics, participation in international trade was seen as one important way by which Europe could contribute to economic growth and development in the Third World. Drawing on classical and neo-classical theories of economic growth, it was argued that the creation of a demand for raw materials provided the impetus to the greater use of under-utilized factors of production and/or the exploitation of those resources for which the country holds a comparative advantage, enabling it to break out of the restrictions imposed by a narrowness in the domestic market.

One such theory, which has direct relevance to the subject of this study, is the vent-for-surplus theory. Although dating back to Adam Smith, it has found more recent prominence in the works of Hla Myint and has been used in a number of studies concerning the origins of international trade in west Africa.

In contrast to the comparative-costs theory which assumes that the resources of a given country are fully employed before it enters into international trade, the vent-for-surplus model assumes that a previously isolated country about to participate in foreign trade possesses a surplus productive capacity over domestic demand whether it be land or labour. The creation of an export opportunity can, by absorbing some of this excess capacity, provide a means of expanding production without affecting the production requirements of the domestic (usually subsistence) sector. Furthermore the venting of that surplus through international trade provides "a virtually 'costless' means of acquiring imports which did not require a withdrawal of resources from domestic

² Most famous are E.W. Soja (1968), P.R. Gould (1970), J.B. Riddell (1970) and J.R.P. Friedmann (1966).

production but merely a fuller employment for their semi-idle labour".³

Several studies have used the vent-for-surplus theory as an explanation for the origins and benefits of international trade in Africa. Tosh has recently argued that in the forest zones of west Africa indigenous peasants were able to substantially increase their production of cash crops such as cocoa, coffee and cotton without adversely affecting subsistence production requirements.⁴

Both modernization theories and international trade theories of economics have a very positive view on the nature of development in the less developed countries. Both emphasize the backwardness of these "traditional" societies and the internal factors which limit their development potential. Development then is seen as a result of the breaking down of these barriers to progress whether it be by diffusion of such "modern" characteristics as education, political emancipation, technology and finance, or by the provision of export market opportunities for the development of productive forces and the creation of wealth.

However they have also been the subject of intense and widespread criticism in recent years covering nearly all aspects of their theories, their methodologies and their policy implications for the less developed countries. In particular was the artificial theoretical dichotomy of traditional and modern societies as two opposite poles of a single linear continuum of development and the arrogant ethnocentrism which promoted the idea that one was dynamic and superior, the other stagnant and inferior. As a result little attention was paid to the societies themselves before European colonization, indeed little penetrating work was carried out on understanding how the societies in the less developed countries functioned.

³ Myint, H. (1970) p. 141.

⁴ He does however, say it is not applicable elsewhere. In Senegal for example, by the 1910's groundnuts took up two-thirds of available cultivable land and the country became dependent on imported rice. Labour was the limiting factor (Tosh, J. (1980)). Hogendorn (1970) also found the theory applicable in Nigeria with the development of groundnut production.

Criticized also was the overwhelming tendency, particularly in geographical studies, to focus on patterns rather than processes of development. Above all perhaps, was the notion that increased links with the advanced countries could not but develop the less developed countries.

Dependency and World-Systems Approaches

During the 1960's doubts about the possibilities of development in the Third World began to grow as it became increasingly evident that many of the less developed countries were not experiencing significant economic growth, indeed the gap between the rich and poor countries seemed to be growing wider. More fundamental questions began to be realized regarding not only the appropriateness of existing development theories and policies but also about the nature of capitalism itself and the structures and processes which determine the relationships between the developed and less developed countries. Much of this work falls within what can be broadly termed a Marxist perspective, which encompasses a number of divergent approaches.

Marx himself paid little attention to the specificities of capitalist development outside the European heartland and did not distinguish between capitalism arising naturally from inherent contradictions within a feudal mode of production and that which was implanted within pre-capitalist modes of production by expansion from the core countries. While emphasising that the precise nature of capitalist development in the periphery would vary from country to country according to the strength of existing pre-capitalist social formation, he nevertheless stressed the progressiveness of capitalism as a force leading to the destruction of those social formations and their replacement with capitalism. Later, theories of imperialism during the monopoly stage of capitalism by Lenin and Luxembourge amongst others, followed Marx's closely, yet held that contradictions within monopoly capitalism in the advanced countries would tend to hinder industrial development in the colonies until colonial links were broken, at which point true bourgeois revolution could occur as Marx had predicted.

This focus on monopoly capitalism as a barrier to development had a very significant influence, particularly through the works of Paul Baran on the approach to capitalist

development in the less developed countries during the 1960's. But, while earlier theories of monopoly capitalism had an essentially progressive view of industrial development in the periphery, Baran argued that the advanced capitalist countries could not permit such development which would compromise their rapacious need for outlets to investment which under-consumption in the capitalist core necessitated. To preserve their own interests the advanced countries would form an alliance with traditional elites in less developed countries to block development. Surpluses which were not transferred to the capitalist core would be spent by the traditional elites on conspicuous consumption rather than on investment in production which would only undermine their own position of local power.

Baran's theory of monopoly capitalism, which diverges sharply from Marx's own writings and those of the "classical" theories of imperialism, was to have a profound influence on the work of neo-marxism scholars from the early 1960's. Perhaps the most famous of these is Andre Gunder Frank, whose dependency theory owes much to Baran's analysis of capitalism. Although Frank's work has been strongly criticized in recent years, there is no doubt that his study of capitalism in Latin America revitalized the field of development theory after the widespread disillusion with modernization theory set in.

Frank explicitly attacked the modern-traditional dichotomy, whether in the progressive view of development propounded by modernization theorists via their "stages" model, or in dualist notions of separate development and non-development within a country. Quite to the contrary, Frank believed that the less developed countries were part of a unified whole, the capitalist system, whose only interest was the extraction of surplus to feed its own development. Following Baran, this was aided by an alliance with local elites which, in their exploitation of the indigenous population, would in turn be exploited by the capitalist classes in the advanced countries to whom would be transferred the "primitive" accumulation which would have stimulated sustained development in the periphery. The extraction of surplus, upon which continued development of the advance countries depended, created the conditions of underdevelopment in the peripheral countries by denying them a source of primitive

accumulation.

Underdevelopment was thus seen as a process of exploitation and not a beginning, or stage, of development. Development of the core and underdevelopment of the periphery were therefore two sides of the same coin. While the advanced countries could be considered undeveloped before capitalism was born from the womb of feudalism, the periphery where capitalism was imposed from the outside could only become underdeveloped:

"Underdevelopment, far from constituting a state of backwardness prior to capitalism, is rather a consequence and a particular form of capitalist development known as dependent capitalism...dependence is a conditioning situation in which the economies of one group of countries are conditioned by the development and expansion of others. A relationship of interdependence between two or more such economies and the world trading system becomes a dependent relationship when some countries can expand through self-impulsion while others, being in a dependent position, can only expand as a reflection of the expansion of the dominant countries, which may have positive or negative effects on their immediate development. In either case, the basic situation of dependence causes these countries to be both backward and exploited. Dominant countries are endowed with technological, commercial, capital and socio-political predominance over dependent countries - the form of this predominance varying according to historical moment - and can therefore exploit them and extract part of the locally produced surplus".⁵

This process of exploitation is achieved in Frank's analysis through a uniform hierarchy of metropolis-satellite relations extending from the core to the furthest corner of the periphery in which each successive level expropriates surplus from below and transfers it ever upwards to be appropriated ultimately by the capitalist classes of the core countries, the over-arching metropolis.

"Thus the metropolis expropriate economic surplus from its satellites and appropriates it for its own economic development. The satellites remain underdeveloped for lack of access to their own surplus and as a consequence of the same polarization and exploitative contradictions which the metropolis introduces and maintains in the satellite's domestic economic structure".⁶

⁵ Dos Santos, T. (1969) cited in Todaro, M. (1979) p. 79.

⁶ Frank, A.G. (1971) p. 33.

But Frank's theory is as much a political statement as a theory of underdevelopment. At a time when many academics and politicians in Latin America on the left saw development as arising from stronger support of the local bourgeoisie, i.e. as a means of instigating a bourgeois revolution which would create the conditions, according to classical theories of imperialism, for capitalist development. Frank saw the Cuban revolution as a sign that socialism could be achieved directly. Frank posited that development in Latin America could not be achieved by supporting a bourgeois revolution since this class was in alliance with the capitalist classes of the advanced countries and it was in neither of their interests to instigate a break which would drain their lifeblood upon which their position of dominance was maintained. The only possible answer was a radical and clean transition to socialism.

An important point of Frank's thesis is that the world is a unified whole, a capitalist system, of which Latin America and later Asia and Africa were later to form a part, from the time when capitalism first penetrated. Thus from

"...the time of Cortez and Pizarro in Mexico and Peru, Clive in India, Rhodes in Africa, the 'Open Door' in China - the metropolis destroyed and/or totally transformed the earlier viable social and economic systems of these societies, incorporated them into the metropolis dominated worldwide capitalist system and converted them into sources for its own metropolitan capital accumulation and development. The resulting fate for these conquered transformed or newly established societies was, and remains, their decapitalization, structurally generated unproductiveness, ever increasing poverty for the masses - in a word their underdevelopment".⁷

If capitalism was the heart of this capitalist system, its lifeblood was the accumulation of capital through the exploitation of the periphery by means of unequal exchange.

Dependency theory has had a profound impact on the theorizing of the nature of development in the periphery. Its most important contribution has been to highlight the inadequacies of the traditional-modern dichotomy by emphasizing the interrelatedness of structures and processes throughout the world economy. In terms of Marxist

⁷ Frank, A.G. (1969) p. 225.

analysis it sought to go beyond the legacy of the orthodox approaches by focusing on the impact of capitalist penetration in the periphery.

For geographers it brought home the methodological limitations of analysis based on ideal type models and lack of explanatory power inherent in studies of patterns rather than processes. Although perhaps its direct influence on geographical research was not as profound as might have been expected, it nevertheless stimulated the search for new perspectives on development issues.

Yet dependency theory has been the butt of intense criticism almost since its inception. It has been attacked for the tautology of its argument that underdevelopment = dependency = underdevelopment. Critics have pointed out that dependent relations are not simply confined to links between the core and periphery but also relate to international relations amongst countries within the core. Thus Canada is highly dependent on the United States, but could not be classified as underdeveloped. Similarly the notion that relations between core and periphery is necessarily a zero-sum game in which there is one winner and one loser sits uneasily with the historical evidence of many countries in today's Third World. The newly industrializing countries in Pacific Asia and Brazil and Chile in Latin America show that impressive rates of economic growth and development can be achieved within the capitalist system.⁸ Perhaps the most vigorous condemnation of dependency theory has come in recent years from more orthodox Marxists and these will be examined below.

In sum the greatest impact on the development literature has been its negation of modernization and dualist concepts of development through stages in which change is seen to follow the breakdown of "traditional" barriers to development existing within individual countries. More important however, has been its negative contribution to development studies in stimulating interest in the nature of the capitalist system, its structures and processes, of which nation-states are merely a part.

⁸ See Browett, J. (1985).

Although dependency theory is now dead, or at least mortally wounded, as an approach to the study of underdevelopment in the social sciences, many of its central tenets live on having been incorporated into a "world systems" approach associated with writers such as Amin and particularly Immanuel Wallerstein. But the world systems approach is altogether of much broader scope than dependency theory seeking not only to provide a framework for understanding the functioning of the modern world capitalist system, but also its historical origins.

Moreover it seeks to overcome the analytic rigidity imposed on research by the artificial boundaries of social science disciplines not by promoting what is regarded as an equally artificial multi-disciplinary synthesis, but by an holistic, unidisciplinary approach which asserts that: "There is no such thing as sociology; there is no such thing as history; there is no such thing as economics, political science, anthropology or geography".⁹ It is an ambitious attempt to understand social change by the creation of an 'historical social science.' Moreover world systems theory was conceived as a rejection of the tendency of modernization theory to apply models to regions or processes out of the theoretical and historical context in which they were created.

It also arose from a profound disagreement with social scientists prevalence for a reification of the nation state as the principal unit of analysis. To world systems theorists the nation-state (and the state itself) was but one part of a functionally wider whole, the social system, or entity, which is self contained and based on "an extensive division of labour" and which contains "a multiplicity of cultures".¹⁰ The world-system then was "a unit of analysis to replace the state. But it was an integral unit and it therefore makes no epistemological sense whatsoever to distinguish a "logic" of the world economy from a "logic" of the interstate system. Indeed it is barely possible to talk about one even provisionally without talking about the other. To try to do so is simply to return to the premises against which world-systems analysis was

⁹ Wallerstein, I. (1983) p. 300.

¹⁰ Wallerstein, I. (1974) p. 348.

a protest. What should be compared or analyzed are historical systems".¹¹

"...it is contended here that most entities usually described as social systems-tribes, communities, nation-states-are not in fact total systems".¹²

The unit of analysis, then, is the social system, of which Wallerstein identifies three as existing in the history of the world: mini-systems which are local subsistence economies where exchange is reciprocal and which is bereft of an organized central state, world-empires which are defined by the extraction of "tribute" by a centralized bureaucracy which produces an inequality lacking in mini-systems; and finally the world economy which is defined by the capitalist mode of production where "production is for profit in the market and where profit is the result of an unequal exchange between two parts".¹³

The history of the world to c.1500 AD is one in which mini-systems, world-empires and world economies co-existed but world-empires were the "strong" forms which "expanded and contracted following a logic internal to them".¹⁴ During periods of eruption they absorbed mini-systems and world-economies while in periods of contraction these would re-emerge. From 1500, however, a world-economy emerged as the "strong" form which "as it expanded, regularly but discontinuously. ...incorporated the world empires and mini-systems it found at the edges, until by the twentieth century it had incorporated the whole globe, and created an historically new situation, the existence of a singular world system".¹⁵

As with Frank, this capitalist system which emerged from the shackles of western European feudalism in the sixteenth century, is defined by world systems theorists as

¹¹ Wallerstein, I. (1983) p. 305.

¹² Wallerstein, I. (1974) p. 348.

¹³ Navarro, V. (1982) p. 78.

¹⁴ Wallerstein, I. (1983) p. 305.

¹⁵ Wallerstein, I., Decdeli, H. and Kasaba, R. (1987) p. 88.

being based on a single division of labour but with multiple forms of labour control the nature of which varied from region to region and country to country according to what was "best suited for particular types of production".¹⁶ Thus while free wage labour may have best served capitalist interests in the core, coerced or slave labour was often found to be more appropriate in the periphery. No matter what form of labour control was established, they were all considered capitalist since they were all created to serve the needs of the capitalist core:

"the relations of production that define a system are the relations of production of the whole system, and the system in this point is time in the European world economy. Free labour is indeed a defining feature of capitalism, but not free labour throughout the productive enterprises. Free labour is the form of labour control used for skilled work in core countries whereas coerced labour is used for less skilled work in peripheral areas. The combination thereof is the essence of capitalism".¹⁷

All forms of labour control within the system are linked by market exchange the benefits of which are unequally distributed according to the strength of the capitalist classes in each country and the strength of the state structures which represent and reinforce those class interests:

"...those countries which are generally referred to as 'core' are the recipients or beneficiaries of the capital accumulation; moreover it is the capital accumulation in these core countries that dominates and shapes the development of the system as a whole. 'Peripheral' countries are those which generate but do not accumulate capital at an equal rate, and which are systematically disadvantaged with respect to the benefits of capital accumulation".¹⁸

This combination of "strong" states and "strong" capitalist classes in the core countries affects the current of unequal exchange flowing from the periphery to the core and thereby further enhances the domination of the latter over the former. The difference with Frank's analysis on this point is not great, capital accumulation through the exploitation of the periphery simultaneously produces development and

¹⁶ Wallerstein, I. (1974) p. 87.

¹⁷ Wallerstein, I. (1974) p. 127.

¹⁸ Jonas, S. and Dixon, M. (1980) p. 226.

underdevelopment in a causal relationship. Wallerstein does, however, refine the bi-polar metropolis-satellite relations by introducing a third category of states, the semi-periphery, which "are in between the core and the periphery on a series of dimensions such as the complexity of economic activities strength of the state machinery, cultural integrity".¹⁹ States within the semi-periphery are both exploited by the core countries and in turn exploit the periphery. They are a necessary structural element in the world economy as a whole particularly during periods of stagnation when capital accumulation in the core becomes more restricted. This results in a "redistribution of surplus more to the bourgeoisie of the semi-peripheral zones...which effectively expands world monetary demand enough to revive the inherent expansionist tendencies of the capitalist world-economy".²⁰ During such periods it is possible for countries in the semi-periphery to rise to core status and vice versa. Clearly the world-systems perspective goes beyond dependency theory in a number of ways.

The essence of the world-systems approach is its focus on the social system and the singular set of processes which stimulate change within that system as a whole. Thus the nation-state, region or a people cannot provide a legitimate unit of analysis because they are integrated parts of a wider whole.

The Mode of Production School

An alternative Marxist literature on underdevelopment emerged during the 1970's. Although born of dissatisfaction with liberal theories in economic anthropology, the work of the mainly French scholars working within what has been termed the mode of production school has since come to exert a considerable influence on the debate concerning the nature of the incorporation of pre-capitalist (or non-capitalist) societies into the world economic system.

In sharp contrast with the works of Frank and Wallerstein, the researchers within the mode of production school explicitly reject the idea that the establishment of exchange

¹⁹ Wallerstein, I. (1974) p. 350.

²⁰ Wallerstein, I. (1980) p. 168.

relations with the capitalist core automatically, or necessarily, results in the dissolution of the existing mode of production in the periphery. Indeed, quite to the contrary it often consolidated it. Thus, Laclau in discussing the beginnings of trade relations between Europe and Latin America notes:

"Now this pre-capitalist character of the dominant relations of production in Latin America was not only not incompatible with production for the world market, but was actually intensified by the latter. The feudal regime of the haciendas tended to increase its servile exactions on the peasantry as the growing demands of the world market stimulated maximising their surplus. Thus, far from expansion of the market acting as a disintegrating force on feudalism, its effect was rather to accentuate and consolidate it."²¹

One of the major reasons for this fundamental difference lies in their respective definitions of capitalism. Both Frank and Wallerstein see commodity exchange as being the decisive determinant for the existence of capitalism hence their belief that "the modern history of capitalism begins with the creation, in the sixteenth century, of world trade and the world market..."²²

To Frank and Wallerstein then, the incorporation of pre-capitalist modes of production in the periphery to the world capitalist system created a single mode of production throughout the world, a capitalist one.

The mode of production school on the other hand deny that the simple existence of market relations was enough to characterize a particular society as being capitalist. To them it is relations of production which ultimately determine the existence of capitalism and those by their very nature must be socially based. The implanting of a capitalist mode of production within the periphery based on exchange does not necessarily mean the alteration of production relations or the destruction of the pre-capitalist mode(s) of production. Different modes of production can co-exist within a single social formation not in a "dualist" sense but as part of "a structured and differentiated whole, the

²¹ Laclau, E. (1971) p. 30.

²² Idem, p. 27.

'economic system'".²³ There is then a period of transition during which the capitalist mode eventually asserts its dominance over pre-capitalist modes of production. The precise nature and duration of this transition is dependent not only on the needs of the capitalist mode but also to the resistance of the pre-capitalist modes.

Rey, one of the principal theoreticians of this approach, has also provided what is, perhaps, its best practical example in research done on the slave-based lineage society in Congo-Brazzaville.²⁴

Before the establishment of trade with European capitalism the lineage society was characterised by two classes, the elders, and the juniors. The relationship between the two was, according to Rey and Dupre, one based on the exploitation of the latter by the former. The surplus labour of the juniors was transformed into prestige goods which were controlled by the elders. These prestige goods were then exchanged for other goods, for women, and also for slaves which exchanges were also controlled by the elders who thus were able to consolidate their own authority over the juniors.²⁵

Rey and Dupre posit a three stage transition from this lineage mode of production to capitalism. In the first phase the lineage mode of production remains dominant. Capitalism is supplied with slaves but this exchange does not promote capitalist relations of production because the lineage society is already geared to the production of slaves and the traditional means of exploitation of juniors by elders is maintained:

"..the European market economy got its supplies [of slaves] essentially by playing on the internal contradictions of the lineage social formations....and in particular by playing on the contradiction between the social functions of the circulation of men and its control by the leaders".²⁶

²³ Foster-Carter (1978) p. 213.

²⁴ Dupre & Rey (1973) p. 131.

²⁵ Dupre & Rey (1978) p. 190.

²⁶ Dupre & Rey (1978) p. 156.

In the second, what Dupre and Rey call the "transitional stage"²⁷ with the elimination of the slave trade European capital turns to the export of other raw materials for which the lineage society is not geared to. The traditional hierarchy of control is broken as commodities by-pass the elders and the lineage mode of production begins to, but does not yet entirely, break down.

In the third stage, which has yet to be reached in the third world, capitalism is firmly in place and the old modes are eliminated.²⁸

In theorizing about the nature of the transition, Rey believes the stages to be replicated in the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the capitalist heartland. Here, however, unlike in the periphery where capitalism is implanted from the outside, the transition is easier "because feudal landlords acting in their own interest simultaneously serve the interests of the emerging capitalist class, so that an alliance between the old and the new ruling class is possible".²⁹ In the periphery, by contrast, the interaction of the pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production actually strengthens the existing productive relations. In this latter case capitalism can only become dominant through the effect of state violence and coercion.

Others within the mode of production school have stressed the persistence of the pre-capitalist modes of production in the periphery as being in the interests of metropolitan capitalism.

Conclusion

This study of the trade in alfa grass in Tunisia exhibits, in many ways, the classic characteristics of capitalist penetration in a non-capitalist society. When the trade started in 1870 the nomadic and semi-nomadic population of the south of the country had few dealings with the Government in Tunis and only very weak relations with the

²⁷ Dupre and Rey (1978) p. 202.

²⁸ Foster-Carter (1978 p. 223.

²⁹ Corbridge, S, (1986) p. 54.

sedentary populations in the towns, villages and countryside of the coastal belt and the northern, grain growing districts. While private property ownership, market principles and even foreign trade were of long standing (though not necessarily either universal or highly evolved) amongst the latter, the tribes of the south were organised along kinship lines, social and economic action was collective in nature and production, strongly influenced by environmental conditions, was subsistence based. Yet within the space of a very few years many of these tribes became directly involved in the market economy by collecting and selling grass to merchants on the coast to meet the demands of the British paper industry. The scale of the tribes' involvement in the alfa trade was remarkable the material quickly establishing itself as one of the country's principle exports. In the twentieth century alfa exports increased sharply as the country was transformed into the major supplier of grass to the British market.

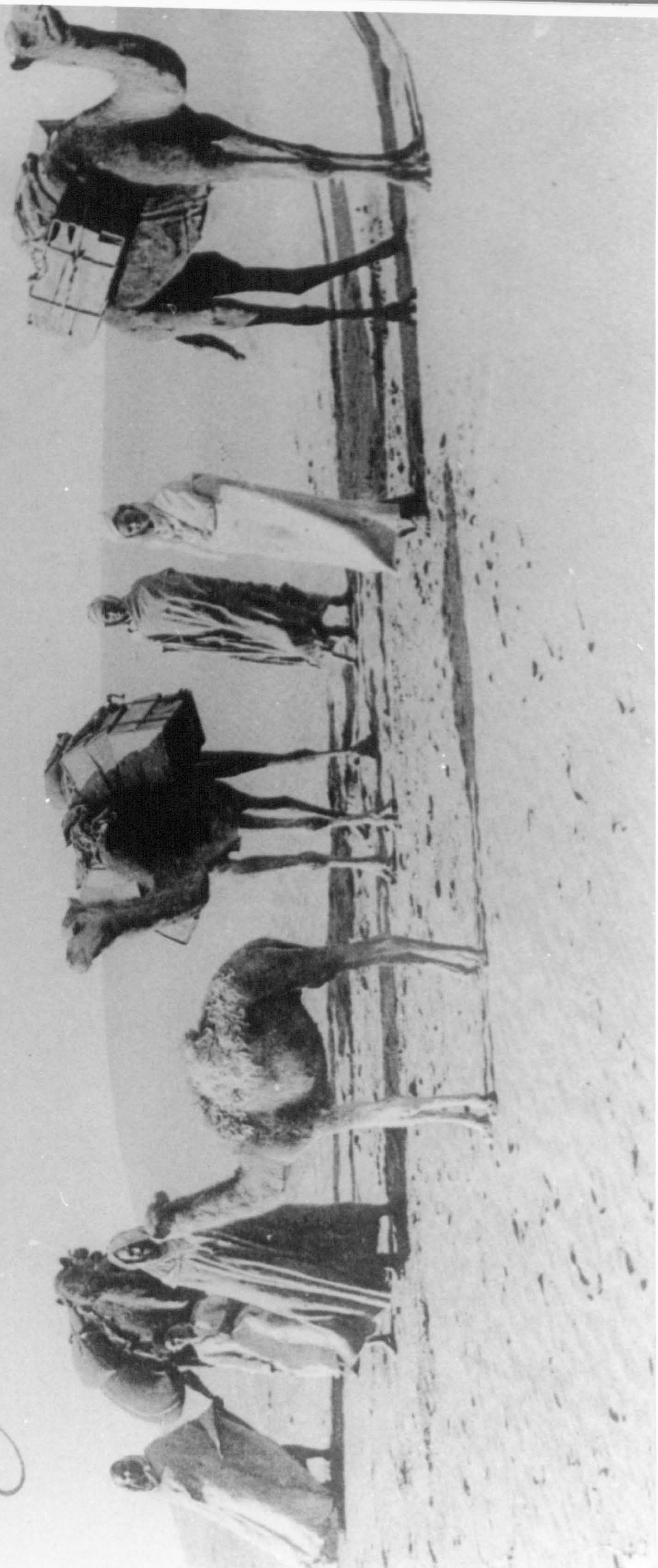
Within the terms of the vent-for-surplus theory of international trade this dramatic attention to the collection and sale of alfa grass on the part of the tribes could have been achieved without impacting the production capacity of traditional subsistence economic activities. Under-utilised or idle land and labour in tribal society may simply have been brought into use. This would imply that surplus income was being generated which could have been used to improve efficiencies in traditional activities or for changes in consumption patterns towards more luxury items. Excess value retained in the supplier regions would provide the means for self-sustaining economic development.

Dependency theory would, by contrast, focus on the fact that as the tribes devoted more and more time to the alfa trade they would become increasingly dependent on the income from the sale of the grass thus placing them firmly at the mercy of foreign business interested solely in securing raw materials at the lowest price. Once this unequal relationship was established it would be self perpetuating since the British paper industry would be able to further exploit its dominance by setting both the terms and conditions of trade between the two parties. Thus the surplus value would accrue disproportionately to Metropolitan capital which would ensure its own continued development at the expense of the tribes on the periphery of the capitalist system.

Unlike Frank and Wallerstein writers within the Mode of Production school of thought view capitalism as a progressive force for development. While the former argue that the world capitalist system is characterised by having a single mode of production, the latter hold not only that many modes of production can co-exist within capitalism as a whole but that the existence of capitalism is not determined solely by the appearance of market exchange. Indeed to writers such as Rey the establishment of market relations may even consolidate the existence of other, non-capitalist, modes of production and prolong the transition to capitalism. The capitalist mode may dominate but does not immediately destroy the other modes of production.

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464. Dans le Sud — Chameliers traversant les dunes de sable



Chapter One

Tunisian Politics and the Economy to 1881

1.1 Introduction

The incorporation of Tunisia into the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century presaged the beginning of a long and turbulent period in the country's history culminating in the establishment of a French protectorate over the country in 1881. The intervening period was one wracked by internal strife as ties with Constantinople gradually weakened, and constant change as the government and state structures evolved and the state's power waxed and waned.

It would be impossible to discuss the political and economic developments of the nineteenth century Tunisian state and economy without reference to earlier historical periods when these structures were formed and during which they evolved. Of particular importance is the country's position within, and relationship with, the Ottoman Empire which strongly influenced both internal change and the country's relations with Europe.

1.2 Tunisia under Turkish Rule 1574-1881

Tunis became a Regency of the Turkish Empire in 1574 with the installation of a beylerbey, or provincial governor, with the rank of pasha of two horsetails.¹ The administration of the province was supported by a council, or diwan, comprising the senior army officers of the 4,000 Turkish soldiers stationed in the country, the Janissary corps.² Besides Tunis, where the main military garrison was established, smaller outposts were maintained at strategic, urban locations throughout the country, including Sousse (Susa), Monastir, Mahdia and Sfax along the coast, and Kef, Beja and Gafsa in the interior.

The Regency was, however, a distant outpost of the Ottoman Empire and the lack of

¹ Abun-Nasr, J. (1975) p. 70.

² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

any direct involvement in the Regency's government on the part of the Porte led, almost immediately, to the eruption of hostility within the Turkish occupying force.

In 1591 the Janissaries rebelled against ill-treatment on the part of their senior officers, who formed the ruling majority on the diwan. They were replaced by a number of junior officers called deys, each of whom headed and were supported by a faction of the regular Turkish militia. The troops then forced the pasha to appoint one of the deys to regulate their lives and supervise security in the capital.

"Because to these troops the country was merely an extension of their garrison post, giving a dey authority over the capital and the troops in it, meant surrendering to him the administration of the country".³

After the uprising the pasha became simply an honorific function without any executive control over the Regency's administration. The diwan itself was transformed into nothing more than a body to sanction the decision of the deys.

The next seven years, however, were dominated by factional in-fighting amongst the deys for the supreme control of the diwan. It was not until 1598 with the accession of Uthman Dey that a single leader emerged with sole power.⁴ Yet his control and that of his successor, Yusuf Dey (1600-1637), was fragile despite the move to raise a unit of troops recruited from the Kabylie tribe, the Zwawa⁵; the deys hoped to counterbalance the power of the Janissaries with these troops, whose number was never allowed to exceed that of the Janissaries.

Although Uthman and Yusuf Deys used the Zwawa troops to curb the rivalry of the

³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁴ The rebellion all but destroyed any remaining authority the pasha held, his title becoming largely honorary, though retaining nominal authority through the sultan's continued sanction as his legally chosen representative in the province. At the same time, the diwan was relegated to secondary importance in the administrative affairs of the province being merely a committee with power only to endorse decisions taken by the deys.

⁵ See Morsy, M. (1984).

other Janissary chiefs, their regime represented the interests of the Ottoman military class in the country. Both of them were Janissary officers before they became deys, Ottoman Turkish was the official language of the state and "a dey could only rule when he imposed his will on the Janissary troops and the diwan in whose name he ruled."⁶

Nevertheless, unlike Algeria, where Ottoman Turks retained control at all major levels of the administrative structure, in Tunis the majority of the executive functions of the administration were assigned not to Turks, but to European slaves (mamluks),⁷ or renegades, who

"...even penetrated the Janissary corps to the extent that at the time of the Algero-Tunisian war of 1628, out of thirteen army chiefs designated by the diwan to defend the country, twelve were renegades."⁸

One of the most important of these executive functions of administration was that of bey. It was during Yusuf Dey's reign in particular that the office of bey increased markedly in stature. Previous to Yusuf Dey's reign, Othman Dey had attempted to subjugate the population of the interior by himself leading punitive expeditions against the tribesmen. Yusuf Dey, however, sent his bey, Mourad, out into the countryside, collecting taxes by means of two annual army-caravans, or mahalla, one crossing the south of the country; the other, the north. As the payment of taxes were the only tangible proof of allegiance of the tribes towards the government, Mourad used his position as tax-collector to strengthen his office and in 1631 was rewarded with the position of Pacha to add to his existing responsibilities.

⁶ Abun-Nasr, J. (1975) p. 73.

⁷ Indeed, shortly after Yusuf Dey's death in 1637, the renegades used their dominant population in the state to serve the deyship for themselves. Mâmî Ferrarese wanted the deyship and had enough wealth and influence to have claim, but he feared Turkish troops. So he used his influence in favour of another prominent renegade, Ustâ Murrad "Genovese," thinking that once the Turks were used to the notion of a renegade dey, Ferrarese would usurp the deyship from him. The plot backfired: "Genovese" had Ferrarese sent to Zaghuan and killed. When the renegade dey died in 1640, the deyship was once again dominated by the Turks. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Although it is perhaps an exaggeration to say that Mourad was stronger than Yusuf Dey, he was no doubt an important functionary of the state, a position he consolidated with the marriage of two of his sons to daughters of the former dey, Uthman. Subsequently, Mourad made his two sons beys in his place: the elder son, Hammouda, was to control the mahalla, while the younger became Caid of Sousse, Sfax and Monastir.

Under Hammouda, the prestige and influence of the bey increased greatly, to the point where it "eclipsed the deyship".⁹ At a time when Turks and renegades were involved in a bitter struggle for the deyship, Hammouda consolidated his economic and political power base by assuring the security of Tunis subduing the increasingly hostile warrior tribes of the interior which had at one point even reached the gates of the capital itself.¹⁰

The reputation Mourad had gained for himself amongst the ordinary citizens of the country was thus confirmed by his son Hammouda; the peasant and urban societies were grateful for the protection against the marauding tribesmen of the interior and the stability that resulted. After 1637, the dey, theoretically still ruler, was reduced to maintaining affairs in the capital, Tunis.

"Under Yusuf Dey the beys had been the executive officers through whom the dey controlled the interior. As the beylicate became hereditary in the Nwradist family, and the beys' power increased, they cut off the deys from the interior".¹¹

The limit of the dey's control became even more apparent later, when Hammouda, like his father-given title of Pasha, divided his functions as bey between his eldest son Mourad, who was to take control of the mahalla, and his younger son, Muhammad, who became governor of the three important towns of the Sahel: Susa, Sfax and

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

It was only in 1673, however, that the political power struggle of the beys and deys broke out into open warfare. After the death of their father in 1666 Mourad and Muhammed took a more aggressive stance with regards the Dey. They deposed a succession of Deys replacing them with old men unwilling and unable to oppose their authority. In 1673, however, while the beys were fighting in Tripoli, a group of army officers who had served in Algiers where the Turks had retained full political control installed a noted warrior, Ali Laz as dey in open defiance of the Beys. On their return to Tunis the beys' forces, composed mainly of native troops, inflicted a resounding military defeat on the Turks who had sought the support of some of the tribes which the beys had been attempting to pacify.¹³ Abun-Nasr has depicted the struggle between the deys and the beys as essentially one of "native" Tunisians who were seen to uphold order against "foreigners" who promoted disorder:

"The reliance of the deys on these tribesmen, who had scourged the countryside on several occasions in the past, and who could be restrained only by the bey, had an important significance. The conflict appeared as a result of this development as one between the productive part of the country which included the fertile lands and the towns (other than Tunis) which backed the beys, and the groups - Turkish troops and nomadic tribesmen - who lived in the margin of the country's productive parts and subsisted by exploiting them. The beys defended stability, order and prosperity, while the Turks undermined all these by their cooperation with the marauding tribesmen. The Turks who were considered aliens and suspected as such, could no longer justify their presence in terms of giving the country the benefit of stability and order".¹⁴

By the end of the eighteenth century Tunis was a Regence of the Ottoman Empire in name only. Although allegiance to the Porte was officially recognized, and given legitimacy through the annual payment of a tribute, real power lay with the beys. While not natives of the land they had battled against Turkish influence, carefully cultivating alliances with the local populations.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹³ Cherif, M. (1984) vol. 1, p. 94.

¹⁴ Abun-Nasr, J., *op.cit.*, p. 82.

1.3 The Husseinite Dynasty

In July 1705, Hussein bin Ali took power, creating thereby a dynasty which was to rule the country for two and a half centuries, ending only with the creation of a Tunisian Republic in 1957. Under Hussein ben Ali and his successors, the deturquification of the administration was extended and links with Constantinople correspondingly weakened.¹⁵ The son of a Turkish Janissary from Crete, Hussein held only tenuous links with the traditional Turkish elite. His mother was a native Tunisian and he had only a rudimentary knowledge of Turkish.

Under the Husseinist rule during the eighteenth century, ambitious attempts to expand the state's administrative apparatus were undertaken and achieved by cementing ties with the indigenous elite. Many of the economic and administrative functions of the beylicate were farmed out under contract to the highest bidder. These *lizma*, or tax farms, were purchased by local notables and mamluks under a system beneficial as much to the bey as to the *lezzam*. They became closely, though by no means exclusively, linked to the position of Caid, or regional governor. The functions of the caid, as well as being administrative (he effectively acted as bey within his own district including having his own armies), involved the collection of fiscal revenue from the population and products of his region. Many of the taxes owed by the populations to the bey, were paid in kind and, in return for organizing the collection of these taxes, the caid retained a portion for his own account. Thus the bey (who retained most of the taxes) and the caid obtained significant resources at a relatively low cost and were able to sell them on the open market for their own account, or to local merchants (native and European), normally at a great profit.

Thus the position of Caid, particularly in those areas most agriculturally productive and with closest links to national and international trade, was extremely lucrative. Many of these were, like the *lizma*, farmed out under an institution known as *Ittifak*, either to the highest bidder or by special prerogative of the bey to those he favoured most.

¹⁵ See especially Cherif, M. (1981).

During the eighteenth century the great families of Caid/Lezzam were established, many of which were to retain their influence in some cases until the present day. Most prominent amongst these were the Bin Ayyad family who controlled amongst others, the Caidats of Djerba, and Cap Bon, together with their customs duties, the Jalluli, Caid of Sfax, the Sahel ports and important lezzams at Tunis, and the Mrabit of the Kairouan region. Mahmoud Jalluli, for example, bought the position of Caid at Sfax and Sousse in 1801 for 225,000 piastres.¹⁶ These families exploited the populations and produce of the country in close association with the beylicate to their mutual benefit.

During the eighteenth century the urban and sedentary populations of Tunis were integrated into the political structures of the state (the position of the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribal populations of the south of the country will be discussed below). They recognized and identified with the primacy of Beylical authority. This evolution of relations between the central government and the sedentary populations influenced, and was influenced by, the growing commercialization of the economy as the country was opened up to foreign trade.

Europe had established trade relations with Tunis long before its incorporation into the Ottoman Empire in 1574 but these were poorly developed until the beginning of the seventeenth century.¹⁷ In part this reflects the existence of better commercial opportunities elsewhere in the Mediterranean but it was also a result of extreme insecurity within the country and around its coast. Piracy, a principal source of wealth for the Turkish rulers of the newly established Regencies of the Ottoman Empire, made maritime trade with and around the Barbary coasts difficult and dangerous:

¹⁶ Cherif, M. (1986) tome II, p. 190.

¹⁷ See especially Sayous, A. (1929).

"As corsairs they infested the whole of the Mediterranean preying upon commerce and upon the coastal populations of France, Spain and Italy and enslaving all Christian captives. It was brigandage at its worst: organised, ruthless and bloody with no discrimination of race, rank or sex, no respect for treaties or capitulations and from the very opening of the Levant trade English shipping had suffered at the hands of these freebooters".¹⁸

British efforts to develop a trade with the Barbary Coast

"...had soon to be abandoned, for a brief experience of intercourse with the three pirate states of Algiers, Tripoli and Tunis, proved the impracticability of doing any stable business among people who lived by plunder and rapine".¹⁹

The French consulate, established in 1585, was staffed by Lazarist monks whose chief occupation was to negotiate the release of Christian slaves.²⁰

In 1665 however, the French, backed by military threat, induced the Tunisian authorities to sign a treaty preparing the way for the expansion of commerce at the port of Tunis. It was agreed that French nationals were to be taxed at 10% on imports and 5% on exports.²¹ Simultaneously, Britain and Holland were permitted to establish consular representatives in Tunis.

Twenty years later, in 1685, at the height of the civil war in Tunis between the beys and the deys, Louis XIV sent a naval squadron to force them to agree to a new treaty which went even further in encouraging the promotion of European commercial links with the state. Under the terms of this treaty duties on imports and exports by French merchants were reduced to a uniform rate covering of 3% *ad valorem*.²² At the same

¹⁸ Wood, A. (1964) p. 59.

¹⁹ As early as 1584, the English Queen Elizabeth wrote to the sultan protesting against the depredations of his nominal subjects. Between 1609 and 1616, 466 English ships alone were captured and their crews enslaved. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

²⁰ Abun-Nasr (1975) p. 87.

²¹ They were also given the privilege of practising their religion. *Ibid.*, p 87.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

time the French negotiator, Marschal d'Estrees, achieved a considerable coup in obtaining for La Compagne Gautier, the concession of a trading monopoly in a region centred on Cap Negre, in the north of the country, the principal exports being grains, wool, horses and leather. Although the extent of the trade expansion which followed is not known, Abun-Nasr points out that French activities were sufficiently important for a French royal order of December 1685 to request the election of two deputies from amongst the community, to regulate their activities in the country.²³

Around the same time, Genoese merchants obtained a similar concession at Tabarka, close to the border with Algeria. The commercial activity of these two areas was considerable and Cap Negre and Tabarka became "...des points d'aboutissement des pistes traversant les plaines cerealieres."²⁴ This resulted in "...l'integration de l'economie agricole d'une vaste region de la Regence dans le mercantilisme europeen".²⁵

But commercial activity, and the agricultural development upon which it was largely dependent, was far from being limited to the northern grain-producing regions. During the eighteenth century trade expanded in all the coastal towns of the Regency. Exports of grain, olive oil, wool and woollen goods, chechias (fez caps), hides, skins, dates and sponges were matched by imports of cloth and manufactured goods. The principal, but by no means the only motor to this process, was European trade. Although the number of European merchants was small and largely confined to the capital, they operated through local intermediaries extensively throughout the country. Apart from the French who traded principally with Marseilles, and Italians in correspondence with Genoa, the principal traders were an influential group of Livornese Jews (Giorna) who, despite being hampered by a duty levied on all their imports and exports of 11%, accounted for a significant proportion of the Regency's trade. The latter also held the monopoly of trade in certain branches of commerce, most notably in the collection, sale and

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁴ Boubaker, S. (1978) cited by Chater, K. (1984) p. 170.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, cited in Chater (1984) p. 170.

exports of hides throughout the Regency. Known as the *Giornata*, the Jews bought this privilege at a high cost, but with commensurate returns to their investment. The importance of European connections with the Regency is attested by the prevalence in commercial transactions from 1630-1640 of the Spanish piastre which had superseded the pre-Ottoman dinar and dirham of the Hafsid regime.²⁶

But the expansion of European, and particularly French, trade and influence in the Regency suffered a serious setback during the years of the Napoleonic wars. Although this had much to do with the effects of war itself it was equally the result of a new-found confidence in Tunis which enjoyed a prolonged period of agricultural prosperity until the end of the wars in 1815. During this period Beylical policies were largely aimed at exploiting the weakness of Europe by diverting the economic benefits to Tunisian subjects.

1.4 Tunis under Hammouda Pacha

Remarkably long by Tunisian standards, the peace and stability of Hammouda's reign brought the country instilled a new confidence amongst Tunisian merchants and agriculturalists. Zouari notes that during the eighteenth century the agricultural lands around Sfax were expanded from a little more than one kilometre from the town walls to more than seven kilometres. At the same time contracts of association with the Methalith tribe which inhabited the region inland from Sfax, once fervent enemies of the sedentarists of the town, increased, giving rise to the further exploitation of wheat, barley, and live-stock. The olive forest also expanded and provided the resources for a considerable trade in oil.²⁷

Hammouda attempted to promote indigenous participation in the economy and curb the excessive influence of European traders in the country by withdrawing their right to

²⁶ See Cherif, M.H. (1968). Valensi notes the irony of the use of Christian coinage in a Moslem state pointing out that at the beginning of the seventeenth century the Spanish piastre was still accompanied by the legend: "Minted by the enemy of the religion, the Christian, may God destroy him", Valensi (1977) p. 211.

²⁷ Zouari, A. (1977) p. 18.

purchase goods directly from the local populations; this forced them to apply for export bonds or "teskeres" from government officials. Moreover, Hammouda encouraged the role of Tunisian merchants in the country's external trade by reducing the duties on goods exported to Europe by native Tunisians to 5.5% from 11% which had previously prevailed. Chater clearly shows the extent to which these measures had on Tunisian participation in maritime commerce (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Tunisian Exports, 24 December, 1813 - 13 December 1814

Exporters	Olive oil (Metars)	Per cent	Wheat (Kfiz)	Per cent
Tunisian moslems	11,875	55.74	2,280	40.24
Jews	9,220	43.28	250	4.41
Europeans	206	0.96	2,760	48.72
Total	21,303	99.98	5,665	93.37

Source: French National Archives, no. 385, cited by Chater, K. (1984) pp. 185-6.

Native Tunisian Moslems and Jews controlled the commerce in oil during this period with Europeans accounting for less than one percent of exports of the material. Although their participation in the grain trade was greater, European merchants played a secondary role in the trade of these, the country's principal exports. A similar situation was evident at Sfax where of the 264,675 piastres worth of trade between 1806 and 1815, 124,214 piastres, or 48% was engaged by Sfaxian merchants.²⁸

It was particularly French and Italian trade which suffered from the combined effects of war and Hammouda's policies. MacGill notes that:

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

"In place of twelve respectable houses which carried on a lucrative trade in 1781 and also several Italian establishments of some consideration, we find in 1808, only two French houses which combined hardly do as much business as one of the former did in a month..."²⁹

Trade between Malta and Tunis, however, increased markedly after the expulsion of the Knights of the Order of St John from the island in 1798.

Although trade had existed before this date it had to be undertaken by ships of other nations which naturally limited the scale of commercial relations between the two countries.³⁰ The end of Christian piracy and the establishment of British naval squadrons on the island increased commercial relations, mainly in foodstuffs, with Tunis and Tripoli.³¹

Trade with neighbouring states and the Levant was also strongly encouraged by Hammouda. In this caravan transportation was of major importance although not without its difficulties:

"Il n'y avait pas dans le pays ni fleuves navigables ni canaux, ni meme des routes normales. Pour ces raisons, il etait tres difficile de transporter les produits des riches regions vers les zones deeficitaires. Ce transport de marchandises, etait meme impossible durant l'hiver quand les routes etaient impracticables a cause de la bourbe...."³²

Despite its many problems, the caravan networks linked the productive regions of the country with the coast and beyond, and put the Regency in close and profitable connection with neighbouring states, including Tripoli, Algiers, the Sahara to the south, and also the Levant. The overland trade with Algeria was particularly important. MacGill notes during his stay in Tunis in 1813 that one caravan a month arrived in that

²⁹ MacGill, T. (1811) p. 126.

³⁰ See Valensi, L. (1963) pp. 71-83.

³¹ Joffe, E. (1984).

³² Bayram, M. cited by Kraiem, M. (1973) tome 2, p. 32.

city from Constantine in Algiers, bringing 100,000 Spanish dollars.³³

Further south, Sfax was at the centre of a radial network of five caravan routes linking it to:

1. Tunis via El Djem and Sousse
2. The Sahel via Mahdia and Monastir
3. Kairouan
4. The Jerid via Gafsa
5. Gabes and Tripoli via Malta.³⁴

The most regular of these was that which brought to Sfax the important date harvests of the Jerid, in the far south of the country. Muhammad an-Nuri wrote to brother, Muhammad Hamid at a caravan station in 1834:

"Les autres villages qu'on traversait c'étaient sans doute aussi, c'était dans ces stations que les commerçants sfaxiens en activité dans le Sahel contractaient les gens de la caravane: caravaniers, commissionnaires et commerçants voyageurs, auprès desquels ils venaient chercher leurs courriers et leurs marchandises".³⁵

Further south still, Gabes was the head of a route to Tebessa and Souf in Algeria, as well as one putting it into contact with Black Africa via Ghadames, and with Tripoli and Egypt. It was this latter route that extended as far as Tunis that was undoubtedly the most lucrative.

The Regency lay at the eastern edge of the great transaharan caravan network, which linked the whole of north Africa, from Morocco to Egypt, with the interior of Africa. Large caravans made their way via Ghadames through the coastal ports of Gabes and Sfax, to Tunis bringing with them the riches of the African interior, particularly ostrich feathers, gold and slaves.

³³ MacGill, T. (1816) p. 126.

³⁴ Zouari, A. (1977) p. 126.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

As late as 1813, MacGill puts at three, the number of such caravans arriving at Tunis each year bringing up to 200 slaves each to be sold in the "souk des esclaves" of Tunis.³⁶ Though dominated by a few Ghadamesian merchants, the trade profited a broader spectrum of Tunisian society from merchants to local traders dealing with the passing traffic.

"Le marche destine a ce genre de commerce est, en effet, garni toute l'annee de cette marchandise humaine....Celui qui veut en acheter examine avant tout, avec le soin le plus minutieux, leurs qualites et leurs defauts physiques. L'acheteur fait d'abord une offre preliminaire approximative, suivant le taux du prix ordinaire. Un courtier (dellal) prend l'esclave en vente et le promene dans le marche proclamant a haut voix l'offre qui en a ete faite et recoit les encheres....".³⁷

Table 1.2 Tunis: Ratio of Exports to Imports, 1755-1792

Year	Ratio (per cent)
1755	100
1766	126
1781	163
1785	197
1789	87
1792	120

Source: Chater, K. (1984) p. 207.

Tunis also benefitted from the commercial activity resulting from the pilgrimage to Mecca, as it became the meeting place for Moroccans, Algerians, and Tunisians returning from Arabia. Toward the beginning of the nineteenth century, pilgrims numbered around 2,000.³⁸ They would leave Tunis with chechias, saffron, craftwork and articles of gold, and return with musk, herbs and spices, fine fabrics, and other

³⁶ MacGill, T. (1816).
³⁷ Frank, L. (1850) p. 128, cited in Chater, K. (1984) p. 146.
³⁸ Raymond, A. (1959) p. 337, cited in Chater, K. (1984) p. 157.

lightweight articles from the Orient. However, with time, more and more pilgrims left by sea: European ships would leave Tunis, Sousse and Sfax with 150-200 pilgrims.³⁹

The Levant trade was extremely profitable to Tunis, showing a clear surplus in the late eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries (see Table 1.2).

1.5 The Resurgence of the Corsairs during the Napoleonic Wars

The French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars opened up other avenues for profitable gain, notably in piracy, which flourished once more. Although never reaching the levels of the mid-seventeenth century when it was at its peak, the pre-occupation of the British and French navies and the end of the threat from Christian pirate ships after 1798 gave a strong impetus to Tunisian piracy. The number of corsair campaigns organised in the Regency reached 97 in 1898 and remained high until 1805 (see Table 1.3).

Table 1.3 Corsair Campaigns Organized by the Regency of Tunis

Year	Number	Year	Number	Year	Number	Year	Number
1764	24	1785	23	1797	87	1806	18
1765	40	1786	12	1798	97	1807	1
1766	32	1787	40	1799	34	1808	6
1767	33	1788	24	1800	44	1809	32
1768	44	1792	34	1801	60	1810	18
1769	47	1793	67	1802	54	1811	29
1777	1	1794	42	1803	72	1812	23
1783	3	1795	71	1804	76	1813	12
1784	46	1796	70	1805	79	1814	1

Source: Grandchamp, P. (1957)

³⁹ Chater, K. (1984) pp. 157-8.

While during its peak in the mid-sixteenth century, piracy was dominated by the Turkish army officers, by the late 18th century it was closely associated with the legitimate commercial activities of the Tunisian elite and the beylicate. The bey himself was involved in piracy directly by arming his own ships, or working in association with merchants. He further extracted 10% on all prizes won by the corsairs in their operations and earned a tribute from a number of states the payment of which was supposed to ensure free passage for their ships.

Piracy developed as a complement to, and not in opposition with, legitimate commercial business. Thus Mohammed Jalluli Caid, an important merchant on the southern coast, armed thirteen boats in 1789 alone, eleven of which left Sfax, one Sousse, and one from La Goulette.⁴⁰ The use of ships switched easily from trade to piracy. All the country's most important merchants and functionaries participated in piracy, including Yusif Sahib at-Taba and other Tunisian dignitaries and businessmen, large and small.

The financial stability and economic prosperity of the beylicate during this period is attested by the composition of the state's revenues. Cherif estimates that between 1799 and 1800 income from piracy and maritime trade provided over two fifths of the Tunisian government's revenues with a further one fifth coming from sale of government positions, such as the caid under Ittifak, and rights of taxation of markets. Income from the countryside in the form of taxes on crops and people accounted for barely 40% of the Bey's total income a remarkably small proportion.⁴¹ The question of government taxation on rural Tunisia will be addressed below. Here it is useful to note that Valensi has shown that the real burden of taxation on the rural population actually declined during the eighteenth century.⁴² Easier profits and revenues were to be had elsewhere, most notably in trading activities.

⁴⁰ Zouari, A. (1977) p. 48.

⁴¹ Cherif, M. (1972) pp. 14-15.

⁴² Valensi, L. (1977) p. 233.

It is important not to overstate the rise of the indigenous mercantile population of the Regency during this period and the concomitant decline in the position of European merchants. In particular despite the wars the Tunisian merchant marine was unable to assert itself to any great extent during this period. Tunisian ships still encountered discrimination in European ports, particularly at Marseilles. Only six of 78 ships entering the port of Tunis during the second trimestre of 1814 were Tunisian, and only five of the 80 ships which departed. British shipping alone easily surpassed these totals with 29 ships entering and 25 leaving Tunis port.⁴³

Nevertheless, the state and its close associates profited greatly from the commercialisation of the sedentary regions of the country during Hammouda's reign.⁴⁴ The increased authority of the bey in the domestic economy and its relations with European trade reflects too, a growing stature in international political affairs. Cherif points out that the 1769-1770 Franco-Tunisian war ended in compromise and the 1784-1792 Venetio-Tunisian war "showed the impossibility of imposing a unilateral peace on the bey".⁴⁵

Although it is easy to overstate the country's new found economic prosperity and political authority it is difficult to find fault with MacGill's view that:

"The state of Tunis never was in so respectable a footing as it is at present; and the subjects never before enjoyed such independence and protection from external enemies....".⁴⁶

To Cherif the period of Hammouda's reign was the "golden age" of Tunisian history.⁴⁷

⁴³ Chater (1984) p. 177.

⁴⁴ Cherif quotes Bin Dhiaf in noting that the wealth of Yousif Sahil at-Tabaa was equal to the total annual receipts of the government. Cherif, M. (1970) p. 716.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 724.

⁴⁶ MacGill, T. (1816) p. 17.

⁴⁷ Cherif, M. (1970) p. 714.

1.6 Tunis 1815-1830: European Economic Expansion and the Beginnings of Private and Public Indebtedness

The resumption of peace in the Mediterranean with the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 marked the beginning of a new era in international affairs which was to be dominated by enhanced economic aggressiveness and political competitiveness on the part of European countries. Industrialization in continental Europe gathered pace giving rise to a greatly increased competition, both for export markets for manufactured output, and for the food and raw materials to supply it, and the burgeoning urban populations dependent on it. The search for new markets and raw materials moved to other parts of the world as yet largely untouched by European trade and industry.

One of the fundamental prerequisites for the expansion of mercantile activity in the Mediterranean was the abolition of piracy, which was perceived as a major stumbling block not just to European trade with North Africa, but with the rest of the Mediterranean. On this point the European nations and the U.S.A. were in agreement. The need for commercial expansion, together with the increasingly vociferous denunciation of slavery on humanitarian grounds, forced the major powers to attempt to abolish piracy, the institution of slavery and slave traffic. The harbinger of more strident efforts in this regard was the U.S.A.'s successful raid on the notorious Algerian pirate, Hamidou on June 17, 1815.⁴⁸ The death of Hamidou during the battle together with a display of naval force, forced the dey of Algiers to sign a peace treaty with the U.S.A. on July 7, 1815.

The following year Lord Exmouth at the head of a fleet of ships from various countries set sail for the north African Regencies of the Ottoman Empire with the express aim of ending piracy in the western Mediterranean and the practice of slavery. The display of military might was sufficient to force the bey to agree to a treaty which abolished corsair activity, although the closure of the slave market in Tunis and the abolition of the institution of slavery was not finally achieved until the early 1840's. The treaty delivered the coup de grace to an activity which had provided important revenues to the

⁴⁸ Chater, K. (1984) p. 239.

bey and the major functionaries and associates of the state in Tunis.

The end to piracy in the western Mediterranean⁴⁹ paved the way for an expansion in European commerce in the Mediterranean, free from the threat of piracy. Between 1816 and 1830, the Regency's external trade almost doubled from 8,559,675 francs to 16,453,666 francs (Table 1.4).

Table 1.4 Development of the Regency's Exterior Commerce 1816-30

Imports			Exports		
Year	Value (Francs)	Index	Value (Francs)	Index	% Exports
1816	3,942,682	100	4,616,993	100	54.00
1826	6,238,811	158	5,893,981	128	48.50
1827	8,787,895	223	8,820,270	191	50.09
1828	8,091,740	205	5,086,585	110	38.59
1829	8,078,592	205	4,807,366	104	37.30
1830	8,598,136	218	7,836,530	170	47.68

Source: Chater (1984) p. 318.

The most striking fact from this table is the greater absolute and relative rise in the importance of imports to the Regency's foreign trade which increased by over 100% during this period. Of this, manufactured goods played an increasingly important part.

Cherif notes that of the 6,608,000 F of European exports to Tunis in 1826, over one half was accounted for by manufactured goods. Textiles and haberdashery, which together made up one-third of total European imports valued at 2,129,000 F, dominated this traffic.⁵⁰ Moreover, these figures are undoubtedly underestimates as they exclude

⁴⁹ Which, however, did not collapse immediately, especially in Algiers.

⁵⁰ Orsay, Correspondance Consulaire, tome 45, Etat du commerce fait a Tunis par les Francais et les Etrangers (Europeens) en 1876, cited in Cherif (1970) p. 727.

the jewels destined for the beylical court, which were not entered into customs returns.

The Regency's exports suffered greatly after the end of the Napoleonic wars from a decline in the value of primary products on the world market and from competition from alternative sources of supply. This was particularly true of the grain trade, hitherto the country's principal export. The trade in grain with France and the Italian states never recovered its pre-war levels as these countries turned increasingly to the Black Sea ports of Odessa and Taganrog to satisfy their demand.⁵¹ Indeed between 1818 and 1822 Tunis became an importer of grain.

The increases in the country's exports during this period were largely due to the expansion in production of olive oil the bulk of which was shipped to Marseille for use in the soap industry. Exports of oil, which had only rarely reached 10,000 hectolitres during the eighteenth century, rose to 50,000 hectolitres in 1817. In 1827 olive oil exports to Marseilles alone were 76,000 hectolitres.⁵² But the rapid increase in the oil trade made the economy vulnerable to fluctuations in the international market price for the product. From 1820 the price of oil fell almost continuously from 30 francs per metal to only 8.75 francs in 1827-1828.⁵³

Deprived of the revenues formerly obtained from the corsairs and the traffic in slaves, the growing trade deficit placed an increasing strain on the bey's finances resulting in a monetary crisis in 1824 when the Tunisian piastre was devalued by one third.⁵⁴ In an effort to improve his ailing financial situation the Bey attempted to assert his dominance in the olive trade by abolishing the system whereby merchants simply bought export rights, or "teskeres", for the exportation of oil which they had purchased

⁵¹ Valensi, L. (1977) p. 223. Between 1820 and 1829, of 555 ships arriving at the port of Marseille from Tunis, only 22 ships or 4%, carried grain compared with nearly 75% of ships between 1771 and 1778.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁵³ Cherif, M. (1970) p. 723.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 730.

from the local population. Henceforth the Bey was to be the sole intermediary between producer and merchant through the operation of "slam" in which the Bey bought the oil from the producers, and sold to the merchants, at agreed prices in anticipation of the harvest. In the event this policy proved disastrous both to the Bey and the producers.

In 1828, for example, the olive crop was very poor and entirely insufficient to fulfil the pre-arranged contracts with merchants. The merchants demanded the oil which they had already bought. After negotiations with the French consul de Lesseps, the Bey agreed to repurchase at 12 piastres per metal (the price reigning in Marseille) the oil which he had agreed to sell to French merchants at 7 piastres resulting in a cost of 2 million piastres to the Bey. The Bey, however, demanded payment from the peasantry who, lacking the resources to do so, were forced to contract loans with European merchants at high rates of interest. The resulting indebtedness of the producers was to have a cumulative effect since in 1830-1831 the harvest was again severely deficient and once more the populations of the Sahel, the region around Sousse, and of Sfax, the other main olive growing region, found themselves unable to supply the oil which the Beylicate had bought from them. Since the Bey demanded the right to the oil which had been produced the peasantry were forced to take on more loans from the European merchants who accepted property and the rights to future harvests as collateral.⁵⁵

Europeans came to dominate the trade in oil. Even at Sfax where their influence was traditionally weak, European traders accounted for 17,500 out of the 19,000 metaux of oil which the government had at its disposal between 1820 and 1822.⁵⁶

Between 1814 and 1830, then, the stability and equilibrium of the economy was broken. The decline of the caravan trade, of piracy and of traditional trading links with the Levant, all of which had provided considerable revenues for the state and its principal associates, was matched by a greater rise in links with Europe from which Europe and

⁵⁵ Valensi, L. (1877) p. 226.

⁵⁶ Cherif, M. (1970) p. 728.

not Tunis, was to benefit. The emergence of a sizeable trade deficit and the increasing commercialization of the economy resulted in the beginnings of public and private indebtedness in the country which European merchants exploited to the full with the support of their consular representatives.

1.7 Political Developments 1820-1830

The increased commercial activity of European merchants in the Maghreb during this period was matched by the greater political interest of the European powers in the affairs of the three north African regencies of the Ottoman Empire. As with trade, French aspirations were to dominate the country's external relations.

In September 1827, the French council at Alexandria, Drovetti, presented to the Egyptian government a plan which envisaged the establishment of Egyptian authority in Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, for which France would furnish Mehemet Ali (Egypt's pacha) with 28 million francs, four men of war and full diplomatic protection.⁵⁷ The programme formed initially in secret for fear of British opposition, by the collaboration of the French, Mehemet Ali and the Ottoman sultan, was designed ostensibly to put an end to Christian slavery and other activities hindering European commercial activity. At the root of the plan, however, were French political ambitions in north Africa which envisaged a French hegemony stretching from Algiers to Egypt. Using Mehemet Ali as the intermediary, it was hoped that traditional ties linking the Regencies to Constantinople would decline, paving the way, at minimal financial and military expense, to complete French political control.

Britain, however, soon learned of the plan and, although favouring certain of its aspects, ultimately feared it would be the back door to French political and economic ambitions in the region. Britain also feared a too powerful Mehmet Ali. Under British pressure the sultan's earlier enthusiasm soon waned and project was dropped. French officials were already doubting the feasibility of such an approach. It did not though, end the country's political ambition in the region. In January 1830, a new plan was

⁵⁷ Raymond, A. (1950) p. 39.

placed before the Conseil du Roi, in which France would occupy Algiers, and Mehmet Ali would be given control of Tunis and Tripoli, with a correspondingly reduced support of metropolitan resources. While Britain trimmed her opposition to the new proposals, Mehmet Ali, who learned of them only the day after he had signed the original agreement, rejected them out-right, and abandoned all claims to the Regencies.

The French occupation of Algiers in July 1830 did not however, signal the end of her political ambitions in Tunis and Tripoli; rather, British and Turkish opposition to the expansion of her empire eastward necessitated a more subtle approach. De Lesseps, French Consul in Tunis, put before the bey of Tunis, Moustapha, a treaty ostensibly designed to procure similar benefits to those with which France had sought to justify her action in Algiers, i.e., the abolition of piracy, Christian slavery, and the practice of tribute. But the treaty went much further: these articles were included merely to forestall European hostility to the other, more important articles of the treaty which guaranteed commercial privileges to European merchants, including the abolition of many of the bey's monopolies over certain sectors of the economy. The treaty also held substantial benefits to French nationals in the country, including the concession of coral fishing at Tabarka without the need for payment.

To encourage the bey's signature, Paris dispatched a naval force to Tunis. Anxious not to provoke a similar attack to that which had proved so disastrous for the dey of Algiers, the bey of Tunis duly signed on August 8, 1830. With French preponderance now established at the beylical court, French officials sought a closer dependence of the country on France. In an effort designed both to reduce the military and financial burden which the occupation entailed outside Algiers, and to strengthen Tunisian ties with France (and thereby weaken links with the Porte), the bey was offered the control of both Constantine and Oran (on payment of a large tribute initially set at 1,200,000 francs).⁵⁸

Until 1833, the British position was to promote a strict neutrality in Tunis's external

⁵⁸ Chater, K. (1984) p. 384.

relation; as a result, her influence in the Regency declined. The British Consul at Tunis wrote:

"...since the treaties of Constantine and Oran...I have experienced every difficulty in the most common affairs....The Tunisian government have become exceedingly difficult and, I may add, insolent".⁵⁹

British attitudes towards Tunis, however, were to harden considerably thereafter. The collapse of the short-lived alliance between Mehemet Ali of Egypt and the French government, which resulted in the occupation of Algiers, also forced Ali to turn his own political aspirations eastward, thereby forcing a major change of the political balance in the Mediterranean.

1.8 Britain's Position in the Mediterranean

British interest in the eastern Mediterranean until the 1820's was relatively restrained, it being still a minor market for British exports. Politically, activity centred mainly on maintaining what commercial privileges she could obtain. As Bailey notes, however:

"The constant increase in exports after 1825 to Constantinople, Smyrna, Beirut, Salonica and Trebizond, to mention only the most important ports under Turkish control - compelled even the most conservative Britons to recognise the significance of the sultan's dominion to the economic prospects of the British Isles".⁶⁰

Technical advances in steam transport encouraged the development of trading links with the Middle and Far East, notably India, for which a shorter route with many coal stops was a necessary prerequisite:

"The perfection of ocean steam ships, steam-powered boats and the railroad, combined to make the Near East a half way house to India".⁶¹

A stable and secure Turkey, through which the favoured overland routes to India passed, was useful for the commercial well-being of Britain. It became increasingly

⁵⁹ Raymond, A. (1954) p. 49.

⁶⁰ Bailey, F. (1942) p. 40.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

apparent, however, particularly after the crushing defeat of the sultan's forces at the Battle of Navarino that Turkey was

"...not a powerful empire, but a weak disintegrating state, with corruption, stricken with poverty, disorganised and disunited and incapable of any long or consistent course of action. The Ottoman Empire had become little more than a loose confederation, although its tradition still gave its government a prestige quite out of proportion to its real strength".⁶²

Nevertheless, Britain's political hegemony in the east was not seriously threatened until the French occupation of Algiers in 1830. Although of no direct consequence to the political status quo in the Levant, the removal of Egyptian involvement only served to focus Mehemet's territorial ambitions towards the east. In mid-1832, Ali sent his son Ibrahim to take Syria, defeating Mahmoud's forces and creating the pashalik of Acre and incorporating it into the Egyptian Empire. As Bailey writes, "Had he stopped there, the European powers would not have got involved."⁶³ But Ibrahim continued to march through Syria as far as Koniah, where the sultan's forces were convincingly defeated. With Mehemet's forces threatening the very heart of the Turkish Empire, the Sultan Mahmoud appealed for British and French support in halting the further progression of the Egyptian forces. They refused, apparently unaware of the gravity of the situation.

The intervention of Russia, which dispatched a force of 40,000 men and seven ships to the sultan's aid, forced British and French involvement in the eastern Mediterranean. The strengthening of Russia's hand with the Porte was a major threat to the political status quo in the east upon which Britain's commercial expansion in the Levant and beyond, had come to rely. British and French mediation however, proved unacceptable to Egypt and, as a result, the two powers sent a naval force to push the sultan into concessions, the result of which was his acceptance of the Peace of Kitalia (3 May 1833) whereby Adana and Syria were relinquished to Mehemet's control.⁶⁴

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Although the subsequent withdrawal of Russian forces seemed straightforward at the time, it soon became clear that two days before the pull out, the sultan had agreed to sign the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi (8 July 1833) which considerably enhanced the Tsar's position with the Porte by agreeing to mutual support if either country was attacked and by giving Russia the right to close the Dardanelles at her command. It was the threat to the integrity of the Ottoman Empire by a potentially hostile major power that forced Britain's greater involvement in the future of the Ottoman Empire.

Thus was created the Eastern Question which was to dominate British policy in the Mediterranean for the next 40 years. It had two main aims: first, to preserve the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire; and second, to encourage the development of the Turkish state so that it would become free and independent. As a result, the position of Tunis and the other Ottoman dominions became of major significance.

While Britain had no political or economic pretensions in north Africa, she could not support or ignore French ambitions there. This would have negated the whole basis of her position in the Levant where the integrity of the Ottoman Empire was now of the utmost importance. France, whose political intentions with regard to Tunis were not in doubt, could not fulfil them without provoking the hostility of Britain. Henceforth, the future of Tunis was inextricably linked with the global political strategies of the European powers and in particular, to the outcome of the Eastern Question.

During the next half-century, France sought to enhance the bey's political independence from the Porte and at the same time promote her own political and economic influence in the Regency. By contrast, Britain's policy depended on the maintenance of the sultan's suzerainty over Tunis. The resulting conflict of interests was to maintain the Regency's formal independence from European control, but only at the expense of a grave and continuous deterioration in the bey's authority over external affairs and the domestic economy. Dependent on the maintenance of a delicate equilibrium of power amongst the European nations the Bey was continuously forced to agree to the numerous commercial concessions demanded by the foreign consular officials on behalf

of their citizens.

1.9 Tunisian Attempts at Reform and the Lengthening Shadow of Financial Collapse

The events of the years following the end of the Napoleonic wars had a tremendous impact on the Regency of Tunis. The rise of a new aggressiveness on the part of Europe in the Mediterranean highlighted the extent to which the Moslem world had fallen behind the west in economic as much as political terms. The once mighty Ottoman Empire had been shown to be entirely incapable of meeting threats from within its vast empire, as well as those from Europe. Indeed, after a catalogue of disastrous military defeats, its continued existence had become merely a function of European global political strategies. The bey of Tunis, however, did not view the Ottoman Empire in such a light. To him the re-establishment of direct Turkish authority over Tripoli in 1835 was a sign of the Porte's desire, and ability, to strengthen the Empire. Threatened from the west by France in Algiers and from Turkey in the east the bey's immediate priority was military reform. Egypt, the only Moslem country which had displayed the remotest capacity to deal with Europe, and the Porte, on level terms, was the model which the country sought to follow. Although military reform had begun under his predecessor, Moustapha, it was under Ahmed Bey (1837-1856) that the attempts reached their apogee.

Ahmed's policy of reform was also deeply influenced by a journey to France in 1838.⁶⁵ What he saw during the visit was a profound shock. The economic prosperity and general advance of French society contrasted sharply with his own country. During his visit Ahmed came to believe that the only way to develop as a nation was to follow the western path. His military reforms, therefore, which were intended to form the basis of the country's political independence, were closely linked

⁶⁵ He was also asked to visit Britain, but as it had been decided that he should be treated as a governor of an Ottoman Province, which meant that he would meet the prime minister or minister of foreign affairs rather than Queen Victoria herself, Ahmed declined at the last moment, viewing it as an affront to his dignity and sovereignty. In line with French policy, he was greeted there by the head of state, a calculated political move which was designed to show the Bey's independence from Constantinople.

to the desire for economic advancement along European lines.

Almost all the major industrial projects created were to service the military. In both cases, Ahmed brought in a number of European, mainly French, technical advisors to ensure rapid success. Powder mills were set up in the kasba at Tunis and at El Djem. Tanneries and factories to manufacture saddles and other leather goods were constructed in Tunis. Ahmed also created a small arms factory located next to the artillery barracks of Sidi Ismail. There, under the direct supervision of French craftsmen, Ahmed installed companies of state workers, with their special officers, the workers and officers drawn from different guilds of the country. The factory produced pistols, swords, carbines, bayonets and axes. As Brown notes, the most ambitious project undertaken by Ahmed was the creation of a textile factory at Tebourba, to provide the army's uniforms and clothing requirements.⁶⁶ In all, the industrial efforts during Ahmed's reign introduced over a dozen European technical experts to assume important supervisory functions, plus several times that number of skilled workers who served as foremen providing on-the-job training for the Tunisian workers.

However, Ahmed's attempts at reform, designed to reinforce Tunisian independence from external control, whether it be from Turkey or Europe, could not but rely fundamentally on the continuance of the conflicting political goals of the major powers. To work effectively the exploitation of conflicting European goals necessitated the maintenance of a delicate equilibrium of their interests. Yet to curry favour with France, for example, by granting political or economic concessions, provoked an inevitable demand from Britain for reciprocal treatment and, of course, vice versa. The overriding need for a balance of these opposing forces meant that the bey had little option but to accede to the demands made of him.

This chronic weakness of the bey's position was fully exploited by the European powers, whose consular representatives, seeking to advance the prestige and influence of their respective governments, came to wield more and more power in the beylical

⁶⁶ See Brown, L. (1974).

court. Increasingly, it was on the economic plane that their growing dominance was manifested.

1.10 Economic Expansion and the Increasing Dominance of European Interests

The re-establishment of peace, the abolition of piracy and slavery, together with the ascension of European political influence created the stable and favourable conditions for an expansion of the European population of Tunis. From a few hundred at the beginning of the century, the number of Europeans in the Regency had grown to an estimated 8,000 by 1834, and to 12,300 by 1856.⁶⁷ Mainly Maltese and Italian, they consisted almost entirely of the impoverished peasantry and urban poor fleeing the overpopulation and economic problems of their home countries.⁶⁸ Initially a transit point on the migration route to Algiers, the new conditions of peace encouraged many to remain in the Regency where they formed a proletarian mass in the country's main towns.⁶⁹ Ferriere, the British vice-consul at Tunis described them thus:

"The greater number of them are of the worst class, disgorged from the Gaols of Malta, expelled from the island and cast off destitute on the coast of Barbary they literally swarm in the small quarter of the town allotted to Christians".⁷⁰

At Tunis, where the majority of the immigrants settled,⁷¹ they inhabited the narrow stretch of land between the Arab medina and the sea in conditions of unmitigated squalor:

⁶⁷ Ganiage, J. (1955) p. 389.

⁶⁸ Some too were political and criminal refugees seeking to escape prison, military conscription or persecution for their beliefs.

⁶⁹ Sammut, C. (1972) p. 434.

⁷⁰ FO 335/96/10 Ferriere to Foreign Office, Tunis, 28 June 1847.

⁷¹ Ganiage gives the following figures: 9,150 out of 12,064 in 1856; 11,000 out of 14,585 in 1870. Ganiage, J. (1955) p. 390.

"Envahi l'été par la puanteur du lac et les égouts, par la poussière, par les moustiques, le quartier franc était inondé l'hiver par les eaux dévalant de la ville haute.... Les rues étaient en toute saison d'une saleté repoussante. Des porcs, par centaines, vagabondaient en liberté, fouillant égouts et tas d'ordures. De jour et nuit les voitures et les chevaux des cochers maltais embarrassaient ruelles et impasses...."⁷²

At an estimated 7,000 of the 12,300 Europeans in the Regency in 1856, the Maltese were a constant thorn in the flesh of Britain's consular representatives under whose jurisdiction they came. Coming and going at will (only a small fraction were registered at the British consulate), they were difficult to keep track of and control, giving rise to interminable problems of public order with the local authorities and indigenous populations when trouble flared.

Nevertheless, many of them maintained or established links with Malta with whom there quickly developed a small-scale but important trade by individuals. Exporting all the agricultural products of the Regency, Malta now became a principal source of British exports to the country which had previously been channelled through Italy and even Marseilles. The Sicilian population performed a similar function in expanding commercial ties with the Regency.

European trade, however, continued to be dominated by a small number of French and Italian merchants, some of whom, like Greno, were descended from the important families of traders established in Tunis since the eighteenth century.⁷³ Often dealing in hundreds of thousands of piastres per annum, these Genoese and Marseille merchants had close links with government officials, and enjoyed great prosperity during the mid-nineteenth century.

The interests of the Europeans in Tunis were looked after by the various consulates

⁷² FO 102/155 Wood to Malmesbury, Tunis, September 3, 1858, cited in Ganiage (1955) p. 391.

⁷³ Ganiage, J. (1955) pp. 392-399.

which numbered fourteen in the capital by the mid-nineteenth century.⁷⁴ Most had consular offices elsewhere in the country and in the case of Britain, France and the Italian states, these were sometimes extensive. Britain alone maintained a network of vice-consuls and consular agents in the main towns of the country, which numbered nine in 1877. The majority were agents performing their consular functions without pay and generally greatly involved in trading activities on their own account.⁷⁵ Their duties included the administration of justice to the European populations who, by virtue of the Capitulations, avoided the jurisdiction of local authorities. Through them also, the Europeans had a powerful voice with the beylical government and its local representatives.

At the start of his reign, Ahmed Bey refused to accord privileges to European traders in the country believing that everyone, Moslem and Christian alike, should submit to the country's laws.⁷⁶ But the consuls pressed him relentlessly, seeking various advantages for their respective populations.

On the commercial plane, the Europeans enjoyed a variety of privileges over native Tunisians including the right of a customs duty of only 3% on imports and exports; Moslems had to pay 8%. By virtue of the French treaty of 1830, they also enjoyed the ability to participate in many areas of the economy previously closed to them by the bey's monopoly. Thus, although the value of Tunisian foreign trade declined substantially from an annual average of 27,890,505 F between 1832-1835 to only 12,440,770 F average in each of the years between 1846 and 1848, the European share increased from 70% to 82% between 1838 and 1847.⁷⁷ Moreover, the trade with

⁷⁴ France, Great Britain, Spain, Austria, Sardinia, Tuscany, Naples, Sweden/Norway, Denmark, Prussia, Belgium, Holland, Russia, U.S.A. *Ibid.*, p. 397.

⁷⁵ Nor were they necessarily British. Four were Maltese, one Algerian (in Djerba), and another Italian (J. Conversano at Galipia); while (Cubinol) at Goulette represented Britain as well as a number of other countries. FO 335/140/5 List of British Consular Agents in Tunis, January 9, 1877.

⁷⁶ Chater, K. (1984) p. 520.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 571.

black Africa, Turkey and the Levant, which had previously been very profitable to Tunis, declined to a fraction of its former size.⁷⁸ More importantly, the trade balance continued to be severely deficient during these years (See Table 1.5).

Table 1.5 Tunis: the ratio of exports to imports, 1838-47

1838	68.0%	1843	112.0%
1839	66.0%	1844	70.0%
1840	108.0%	1845	-
1841	56.0%	1846	44.4%
1842	76.0%	1847	64.5%

Source: Chater, K. (1984) p. 574.

The bey’s financial position was becoming increasingly precarious. The heavy cost of Ahmed’s military reform and industrial expansion was exacerbated by the continued large trade deficit. Unable, because of European pressure, to significantly alter the customs and excise duties, the only option open to the Bey to shore up his ailing finances was to raise the level and effectiveness of taxation on the native population. State monopolies on leather, salt and tobacco were introduced.⁷⁹

The old tithe on olive production, which at 10% of the harvest resulted in lower revenues to the state in years of poor crops, was replaced by the kanoun which was paid at a set rate for each producing tree. This fixed rate now had to be paid irrespective of the yield of oil achieved. The institution of the kanoun was preceded by a careful census of the olive groves of the Sahel, and later other regions, which meant that non-payment became virtually impossible. Valensi points out that after 1840 the people of Msaken, in the Sahel, paid three times the amount of taxes on their oil

⁷⁸ Exports to Egypt which had accounted for 14% of Tunisian exports in 1838, had fallen to only 3.6% of the total by 1847. Trade with Turkey declined from 10% of the total in 1838-1839 to only 1.3% in 1847. *Ibid.*, p. 572.

⁷⁹ Henia, A. (1980) p. 105.

production compared to that collected under the tithe.⁸⁰ In 1852 the kanoun levied for the first time on the important date producing region of the Djerid in the far south of the country.⁸¹ Taxes on commerce were also introduced throughout the country the most notable being the mahsoulat, a duty paid on all produce brought to the rural and urban markets. But perhaps the most controversial and most far reaching fiscal measure of the period was the raising of a capitation tax (known as the medjba) introduced the year after Ahmed's death in 1855. To be paid by all adult males it was widely opposed as being in breach of Muslim law. The medjba became by far the most important revenue earner for the government. At 36 piastres per head per year it was also the heaviest tax on the population. The repercussions of the tax will be examined below.

The collection of the taxes was assured by the extension of the system of Lezzam under which the right to collect the dues was farmed out to the highest bidder at auction. While this assured relatively stable revenues to the government it also encouraged abuses on the part of the collectors who retained a percentage of that collected. The burden of higher taxes which the population had to bear was increased immeasurably by the illegal exactions of the tax farmers and Caids.

Despite the fiscal reforms the financial state of the government continued to deteriorate to such an extent that in 1850 the Bey gave serious consideration to the offer of a French loan. The Marseilles businessman Eugen Pastre offered to provide 15 million F to be repaid over five years in return for which the bey would guarantee permits for the exportation of Tunisian olive oil. This provoked an immediate angry response from Britain, which regarded it not only as financially ruinous but also politically and economically dangerous in that it would have given French traders a monopoly of one of the country's most important branches of commerce and pushed the Bey into an

⁸⁰ Valensi, L. (1977) p. 236.

⁸¹ Henia, A. (1980) p. 111.

excessive dependence on France.⁸²

In order to forestall the French from attempting to exploit the country's financial problems, and to strengthen the bey's economic base the British consul, Baynes, now actively promoted the urgent need for greater fiscal liberation and the dismantling of such barriers to trade as the state monopolies.⁸³ Although this would benefit the British position in Tunis both politically and economically, it would also, and more importantly, provide a stimulus to agricultural regeneration from which the treasury would derive substantial benefit. This could profitably be used to avoid the need to contract a foreign loan on onerous terms thereby preventing an increased dependence on France and putting the country's independence from external intervention on a firmer footing.

Despite French support for his position, the bey, after intense lobbying by Baynes, finally agreed to lighten the existing customs duties and abolish some of the state's monopolies.⁸⁴ These promises, however, were never carried out. The loss of such important revenues would have gravely prejudiced the treasury's extremely delicate position. The root of the country's problems were left untouched as the country slid towards financial disaster. The situation worsened in 1854 with Ahmed's decision to despatch a military contingent to the Crimea, the cost of which was only met by the disposal of much of the bey's personal wealth. At his death in May 1855, Ahmed left a budget deficit of almost 1.5 million piastres and a country on the verge of internal collapse, with little hope of solution.⁸⁵

1.11 The Attempt at Constitutional Reform and the Fundamental Pact

The conclusion of the Crimean War (1856) brought a rapprochement in relations

⁸² FO 102/37 Baynes to Palmerston, October 3, 1850, cited in Raymond, A. (1954) pp. 206-207.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 207.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁸⁵ Chater, K. (1984) p. 582.

between France and Britain on eastern affairs and with it the revival of hopes of far-reaching reform in Tunis. Essentially attention was focused on the need for reform of the Ottoman Empire of which the Katti Humayun (21 February 1856) was the precursor.⁸⁶ In Tunis the ascension to power of Mohammed Bey and the arrival of new British and French consuls, Richard Wood and Leon Roches resuscitated the hopes for reform in the Regency along the lines of the Katti Humayun.

But while Mohammed Bey saw the need for substantial administrative and economic reform, his general philosophy was at once more Moslem in outlook and less westernized. Thus any change would have to conform to the Islamic religious, social and political traditions of Tunis.

In this schema, the absolutism of the state and the return to prominence of the Ulama from whom he drew considerable support, were central to his beliefs.⁸⁷

Mohammed did however, go some way to easing the country's administrative heavy-handedness and economic problems. Greater attempts were made to curb the excessive exactions of the tax collectors, and some taxes were reduced to more realistic levels. Wood however, sought further encouragement of commercial liberalization and also, greater administrative reform, particularly the promotion of constitutional government. Although having the support of Roches, Wood's plans now met with strident opposition from the French government, for whom a stronger, more independent Tunis was hardly in its own interest.

With neither the support of the bey nor that of France, Wood was in no position to enforce his proposals.⁸⁸ At this point, however, occurred what on the surface seemed

⁸⁶ Raymond, A. (1954) p. 228.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 231-232.

⁸⁸ In fact, he was not even supported by the Foreign Office, which continued to state that the continuance of ties which bound Tunis to the Ottoman Empire were central to its policies in the east. The promotion of Tunisian independence necessarily threatened this. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

a minor incident concerning public order between a Jew and an Arab in Tunis, but which came radically to alter the political state of affairs in the Regency. A Tunisian Jew, Batto Slem, was accused of having insulted a Moslem in the streets of Tunis while drunk. But instead of judging the incident himself, as was normal practice in legal proceedings involving a Jew, the bey acceded to pressure from the Ulama to have the case heard by a sharia court, which pronounced the death sentence on the Jew. The execution was hastily carried out without the bey's intervention and despite strong European protests.⁸⁹

The event provoked uproar amongst the European population of the Regency for whom it typified the barbarity of beylical absolutism and its total disregard for civil liberties. The European consuls immediately demanded the creation of new treaties which would guarantee the sanctity of human life and property; indeed, they went further to include the liberalizing of trade and the abolitions of state monopolies.

The arrival of a French squadron at Tunis in August 1857 was designed to persuade the bey to accede to mixed courts and the enforcement of the commercial treaties. Beyond this, the French were unwilling to go. They remained hostile to reform in Tunis along the lines of the Katti Humayun. Remarkably, however, it was the arrival of the French fleet, sent to ensure Mohammed's signature to the treaty, which brought about Mohammed's agreement to far more extensive reform. These reforms Paris did not see in its interest.

Wood, without the approval of his Foreign Officer, took the opportunity of informing the bey (falsely) that the French intention in despatching the naval force was to enforce his submission to reform for which he claimed, (again, falsely), that they had full British support. More remarkably still, Roches, in clear contradiction of his government's policies, supported Wood's statements and the bey had little alternative but to accede to their demands. The result was the signing of the Fundamental Pact (Ahd el Aman) on September 9, 1857, which embodied the main articles of the Katti

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 245-246.

Humayun:

1. Creation of criminal tribunals for cases involving Jews.
2. Creation of mixed commercial tribunals.
3. Civil and religious equality.
4. Absolute free trade and right to hold property.
5. Equality in eyes of government.⁹⁰

Aspirations of constitutional reform were not limited to the European consuls. A small clique of government functionaries, mainly mamluks, had for many years supported the liberalization of trade and in particular, constitutional reform, to limit the powers of the absolutist state and encourage more freedom and stability before the law. This small group of reformers, led by General Kherreddine, was most exposed to western ideals and thought, Kherreddine himself having been Tunisian Ambassador in London, and voyaged extensively throughout Europe and Turkey where the introduction of the Tanzimat was having a profound impact on the intellectual elite.⁹¹ The French government in Paris, despite its opposition, found it impossible to oppose reform in Tunis which it had promoted in Turkey.

The Fundamental Pact was only the beginning of further, more extensive change. With it, the indigenous reform movement of Kherreddine and his associates were in the ascendancy in the government. Profoundly pro-western in outlook, they received the full support of British officials in the Regency and the search began in earnest for ways in which to end the autocratic and corrupt government, and turn around the country's rapidly declining fortunes.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

⁹¹ Kherreddine received a western education in contact with military instructors recruited by Ahmed to organize his new army. Reinforced by his long stay in France to defend Tunisian interests there in the affairs of Ben Ayyad, Kherreddine only returned to Tunis in 1857 to the post of minister of the marines, convinced of the need for adopting European organization and institutions to ensure freedom and justice, thereby generating progress and civilization. Kraiem, M. (1973) tome 2, chap. 9.

These efforts bore fruit in the declaration of the Tunisian Constitution in 1861.⁹² The constitution effectively replaced the absolutist monarchy with a form of parliamentary monarchy dividing power between the bey and Grand Council composed of 60 members drawn from amongst the high government functionaries and notables of the country.⁹³

The state's administrative framework was greatly altered with the creation of the Grand Minister, under whom and directly responsible to, were the various Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Finances and War.

The Judiciary too, was overhauled with the establishment of a Supreme Council to judge and mediate between the important legal disputes of the country, creating precedents in cases where none existed for decisions in the lower courts.⁹⁴ Other tribunals were set up in the major towns with the task of hearing cases among individuals of criminal acts, public disorder, violence and murder.⁹⁵ To regulate commercial litigation, a separate tribunal was created which was composed of Tunisians and foreigners.

As part of the new constitution the European consuls had to agree to the abolition of consular jurisdiction in cases involving foreigners who would henceforth be subject to the same laws and conditions of the Tunisians and judged by the same courts.⁹⁶

The proclamation of the Fundamental Pact and the framing of the Constitution were dramatic signs of the decline in the authority of the bey in the face of strenuous and

⁹² Green, A.H. (1970) p. 226.

⁹³ The bey was given a civil list of 1.2 million piastres with stipends allocated to the princes of his family. Kraiem (1973) tome 2, p. 267.

⁹⁴ It acted on a final court of appeal in disputes at all levels, and had final decision on all cases involving the death penalties.

⁹⁵ Kairouan, Sousse, Sfax, Aradh, Djerba, Beja, Le Kef, Bizerte, Djerid. *Ibid.*, Chap. 9.

⁹⁶ This drew widespread criticism, particularly from the Italian and French consuls who were not convinced of the impartiality and capability of these courts.

concerted European activity. The breach firmly established, the European Powers now set about exploiting the situation. Having achieved the recognition of civil and equal rights under law, the liberalizing of the oppressive administrative and fiscal systems, and the supremacy of the rights of free trade, the foreign consuls now sought to consolidate their influence in the beylical court with the aim of enhancing their respective government's political prestige and maximising the economic benefit which could be extracted for their nationals. Britain received the right of a cotton growing concession, the creation of the country's first bank, and in 1864 the construction of a railway between Tunis and La Goulette. For its part France obtained in 1859 the monopoly of telegraph services in the country.⁹⁷ More importantly for his finances, the Bey was induced to finance the rebuilding, by French contractors, of the aqueduct between Tunis and Zaghouan at a cost of 12m francs.⁹⁸ He also agreed to build a new French Residency at a cost of 680,000 Francs, in response to which Britain demanded a new Residency at La Marsa.⁹⁹

The cost of such projects were unsupportable and financial collapse now imminent. In 1861 the Beylicate's public debt amounted to 12 m francs. By 1862 this had risen to 28m francs¹⁰⁰ and the need to take on a loan became unavoidable. There were no shortages of sources of funds but, under the influence of the corrupt Treasury Minister, Khaznader, the Bey ignored the less onerous offers from such reputable banking houses as Rothschild in favour of those offered by the Parisian banker Erlanger. In 1863 an arrangement with Erlanger was reached providing for a loan of 35m francs at 7% interest. Of this however, thanks to the collusion of Khaznader and Erlanger the Bey received only 5.6m francs. Yet the state was now faced with the repayment of 65m francs over fifteen years. Within months the Treasury was forced to find 4.2m francs, amounting to one third of the Tunisian budget, simply to repay the interest due on the

⁹⁷ Harber, C. (1970) p. 31.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁹⁹ The combined total cost for the projects being 2m francs. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁰⁰ Raymond, A. (1954) p. 336.

loan.¹⁰¹

It was not just the state which was becoming increasingly indebted to foreign interests. The Fundamental Pact and constitution unleashed the full forces of European merchant capitalism throughout the commercialized regions of the country. Worst hit were the olive growing regions of the Sahel. Greater freedom to trade enabled European merchants to fully exploit their dominant position in the market place.¹⁰² Their speculation in teskeres of oil heightened the instability of the market place and increased the indebtedness of the peasantry. For those who defaulted on their obligations, there was, since the Constitution, the threat of legal action which often resulted in the seizure of their lands by Europeans now able to hold property.

Discontent with the expansion of European influence and the decline of the local authority's ability to control it, became wide-spread among the population of the Sahel. There seemed little protection from the merchants' avarice, even from the new local courts which were equally despised for their slow and cumbersome attribution of justice.¹⁰³

Faced with the prospect of impending financial ruin, the Bey resorted to the time-honoured practice of passing on the burden to the Tunisian population. In December 1863 the widely despised capitation tax, or medjba, was doubled from 36 piastres to 72 piastres, and the exemptions of the towns and government functionaries was lifted.

The result was widespread and open rebellion against the government and the European inhabitants. The sedentary populations at first opting for passive resistance by refusing

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

¹⁰² Movement of Ships at Sousse: 1857, 110 ships, of which 10 French; 1858, 158 ships, of which 33 French, 43 British; 1859 335 ships, of which 45 French and 45 British. Source: Chater, K. (1984) p. 37.

¹⁰³ Raymond, A. (1954) p. 340.

to pay their taxes and disregarding the teskere system for the purchase and exportation of oil, were soon caught up in the general revolt amongst the tribes of the south and centre of the country. What began mainly as a revolt against the medjba was transformed into a protest against the advance of European interests and abandonment of the traditions of the Islamic state enshrined in the new Constitution.

With Europeans being openly attacked and the economy in disarray, the Italian and French consuls seized the opportunity to impress upon the bey the need to abandon the Constitution. The French Consul De Beauval even went as far as contacting the revolt’s leader, Ali ben Ghedahem in an attempt to encourage his greater hostility to force the bey to accede to French demands.¹⁰⁴ Only strenuous efforts by Wood averted the landing of both Italian and French troops in the country, ostensibly to ensure the safety of their countrymen.¹⁰⁵

Table 1.6 Fines Imposed by the Mehalla on the Towns of the Sahel

Caidat	Amount in piastres
Sousse	6,500,000
Monastir	6,486,000
Mahdia	500,000
Total	13,486,000

Source: Chater, K. (1978) p. 176.

In 1864 the Bey formed a military column, which under General Ahmed Zarrouk, left Tunis for the south to put down the revolt. In order to pay for the military column the bey sold teskeres for the exportation of the following year’s olive harvest. The total amount collected thus from local merchants, was 3,654,000 piastres.¹⁰⁶ In order to

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

¹⁰⁶ Chater, K. (1978).

meet the costs of the project, the pacification was followed by a brutal imposition of exorbitant fines which were particularly directed at the Sahel of Sousse. The total fine in the Sahel amounted to some 13.5 million piastres (Table 1.6)

Although the brunt of this tax was borne by local notables, one half of those eligible to pay the medjba were forced to pay.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, he demanded the immediate payment of the medjba, kanoun, mahsoulats and other ordinary taxes due for the current year.

The population of the Sahel, already heavily indebted to local merchants, were forced to mortgage their property which Zarrouk then passed to the merchants in return for cash. The latter then accepted the future olive harvests as payment for the debts with the local population. As the harvest of 1865 was insufficient to meet their obligation, the loans were renewed at higher rates of interest to be paid on the succeeding harvests. In cases of non-payment their property was sold.

In effectively ruining the Tunisians of the Sahel, the Bey drew little benefit. The revenues gained from the Mehalla, which Chater estimated at over 23 million piastres, were not sufficient to avert the need to contract a further loan in 1865 again with Erlanger.¹⁰⁸ This time of the 25 million francs agreed the Treasury received only 7.5 million francs.¹⁰⁹ Having virtually exhausted the resources of the population the potential of taxing the Tunisian population was by now extremely limited and exacerbated by the fact that the harvest of 1865 was poor. On its arrival at Beja the tax caravan found that, "...il n'y avait rien a recouvrir - tout etait ruine".¹¹⁰

The Bey now resorted to the coining of copper money which was immediately

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁰⁹ Raymond, A. (1954) p. 402.

¹¹⁰ FO 102/77, Wood to Stanley.

depreciated by 100%, then 300%.¹¹¹ By 1868 the debt had swollen to 160 million francs of which the annual interest, at 19.5 million francs, exceeded the total revenue of the state.¹¹²

Table 1.7 Tunisian Trade, 1861-71

Year	Imports (francs)	Exports (francs)
1861	17,627,334	19,485,614
1862	17,936,959	18,128,507
1863	10,378,738	7,984,800
1864	10,014,250	4,165,420
1865	9,603,009	10,125,180
1866	14,920,500	12,087,575
1867	12,273,520	9,915,830
1868	12,962,695	7,918,200
1869	11,488,300	4,443,933
1870	8,382,295	6,031,980
1871	9,821,244	9,321,298

Source: Arnoulet, F. (1947) p. 36.

In July 1869, the European powers finally stepped in to secure the repayment of the debt with the creation of the International Financial Commission, composed of members representing France, Britain, Italy and Tunis. This marked the end of the long process of subjugation of the political and economic independence of the bey and country of Tunis. Henceforth, decisions regarding the administration of the country and the economy were taken by European powers, the bey having become merely the nominal head of the country.

¹¹¹ Arnoulet, F. (1947) p. 35.

¹¹² Raymond, A. (1854) p. 423.

Under the Commission's tutelage the economic penetration of Europeans was completed with the introduction of capital destined to public works. The European countries now set about the greater exploitation of the country's resources. Wood's views reflect those of the Commission and the European population in general:

"...it is essential with a view to the development of the rich but dormant resources of the Regency and the increase of the revenue, that the Tunisian Government should encourage the introduction of foreign capital and energy for the construction of public works, particularly of railroads, to facilitate the transport of the large quantities of grain grown in the interior to the coast for exportation".¹¹³

While Wood, and Britain, continued to regard this as essential to the maintenance of Tunisian independence from French, and now Italian, political control, the latter merely regarded it as an expedient for the fulfilment of that which Britain feared. The struggle for control of Tunisia was largely played out in the competition for innumerable concessions of all types, such as banks and railways.

However, the fate of the country was decided less by the internal struggle for control of the country's public works and resources than by an ironic chance of British political priorities in the east. The Russian invasion of the Turkish Empire forced Britain to react. Without French aid, Britain sought to annex Cyprus as a base from which to combat the Russian menace. For this concession, Britain tacitly agreed to leave Tunis for France.

Although the end would not come until 1881, Tunis's fate was sealed at the Berlin Conference of 1876, if any doubt as to its eventual fate still existed.

¹¹³ FO 335/127/2 Wood to Granville, Tunis, 19 November, 1872.



FOUM-TATTAHOUNE. — Le Marché

Chapter Two

Tribal Tunisia

2.1 Introduction

Up to this point Tunisia's history has been discussed only with reference to the urban area and sedentarized region, the latter particularly concerning the grain growing northern districts and the predominantly olive producing eastern littoral. Here the processes of urban specialization, agricultural commercialization and social stratification in the modern era began long before the European advance of the nineteenth century, its most obvious manifestation, as described above, being the growth of foreign trade and the country's greater integration with the rapidly evolving Mediterranean and European economy from the sixteenth century at least. It was therefore here that increasing European economic penetration and political influence from the seventeenth and, most strikingly, during the nineteenth century, had its most immediate impact. The European populations settled in the towns from where they gradually assumed the dominant role in the country's economic and political development.

Yet this deals with only a minority of Tunisia's population. Beyond this relatively narrow coastal belt in which economic activity was increasingly oriented towards production for the urban centres and international commerce, lay the vast domain of the tribes which covered the whole of the territory from the mountains in the north to the fringes of the Sahara desert in the south (Map 2.1). Living a mainly pastoral and subsistence existence, these nomadic and semi-nomadic populations of Tunis, and the Maghreb generally, have traditionally been characterized by their apparent political autonomy from the central Government which directed the lives of the settled populations, and by their perceived internal economic equality and social egalitarianism. As a result, tribal Tunisia has generally been studied as an entity existing in a state of complete, or near complete, isolation from the wider society and so protected from the great political, economic and social changes affecting the coastal populations as outlined in the previous chapter.

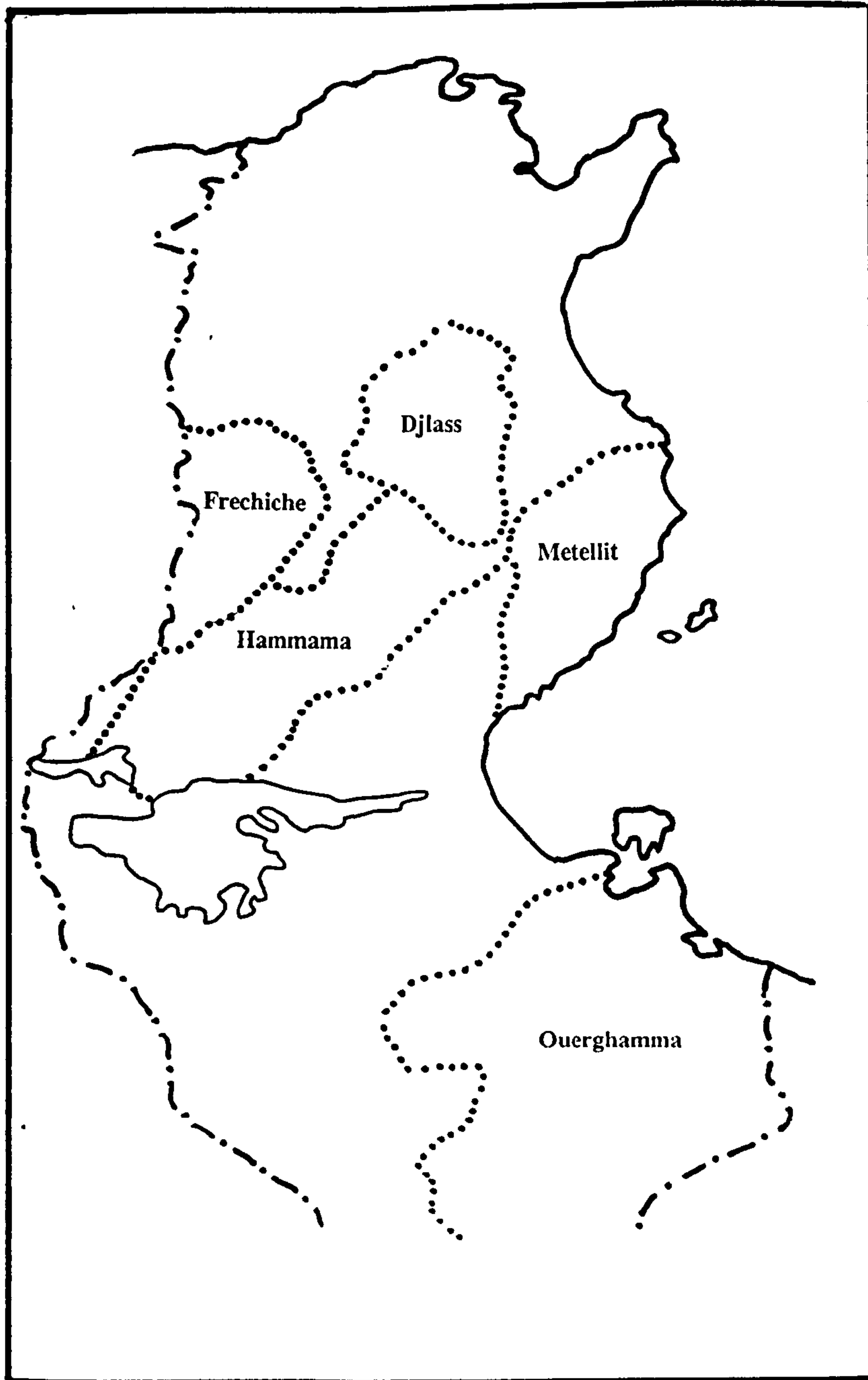


Figure 2.1 Territories of tribal confederations. Source: Mensching, H. (Ed.)(1985)
Afrika - Kartenwerk, Serie N: Nordafrika Berlin: Gebrüder Borntraeger

2.2 Physical Geography and Climate

Although a small country of only 155,000 square kilometres in area, Tunisia is a land of striking contrasts in terms of both its physical geography and bio-climatic diversity. While the country's situation bordering the Mediterranean to the north and east is a moderating influence, the proximity of the Sahara desert to the south and the Algerian land mass to the west means that climatic conditions are highly variable and environmental conditions often harsh. Rainfall nowhere exceeds 1,500 mm each year (Figure 2.2) while temperatures can reach over 55 degrees Celsius in summer months.¹

The north of the country is most influenced by the Mediterranean climate (Figure 2.3), temperatures being more moderate than further south and rainfall at once higher and more regular. A mountainous region in which the elevation increases to the south but declines towards the east, the northern Tell is dissected by a number of valleys which open out into the plains of Bizerte, Mateur, Beja and the Cap Bon peninsula near the coast. The prevailing north, north-westerly and north-easterly winds bring copious amounts of moisture particularly in the Kroumirie mountains of the north-west where the average annual rainfall exceeds 1000mm, reaching as high as 1,500mm in Ain Draham. But rainfall declines sharply to the south and to the east in the shadow of these coastal mountains, Tunis receiving an average of only 438mm of precipitation in the year. Yet relief and the orientation of the mountains give rise to considerable regional and local climatic variations. Jendouba at the foot of the middle Medjerda valley and only 40 km from Ain Draham, receives only 473 mm of rainfall on average each year.² Further south at the higher elevations in the high Tell around Thala and Maktar, average annual rainfall increases to over 500mm under the influence of westerly winds which bring rain especially in the spring and summer months.³ The lower lying land of north eastern Tunisia, while not enjoying the same level of rainfall as the north west, benefits from proximity to the sea, the relative humidity of the air being higher than the interior while evaporation rates are generally lower. The

¹ Kassab, A. and Sethom H. (1980) p.59.

² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³ Fakhfakh, M. (Ed.)(1979) p. 17-19.

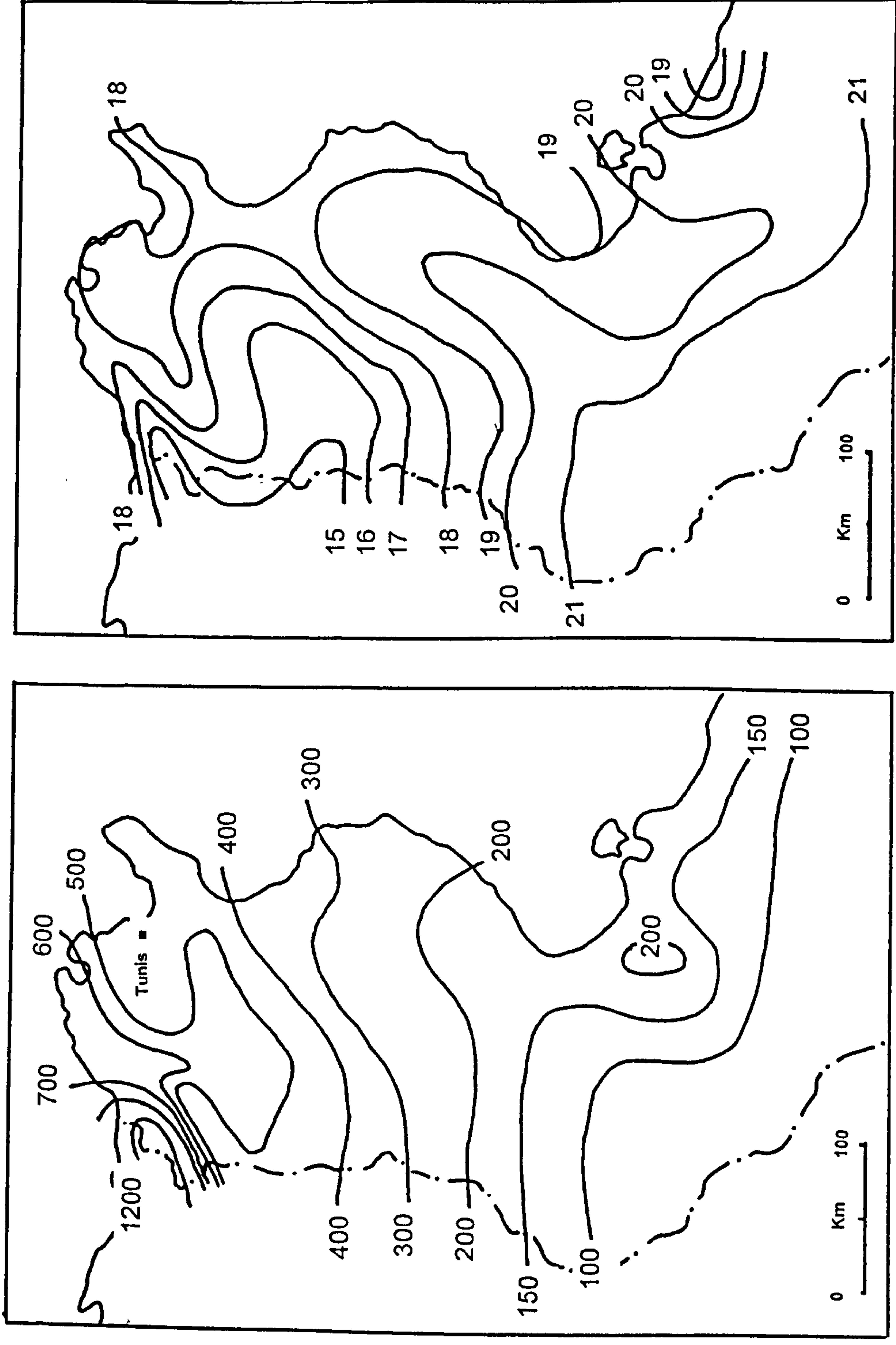


Figure 2.2 Mean annual rainfall in millimeters and mean annual

temperature in degrees Celsius. Source: Mensching,

H. (Ed.)(1985) *Afrika - Kartenwerk, Serie N: Nordafrika*

Berlin: Gebrüder Borntraeger

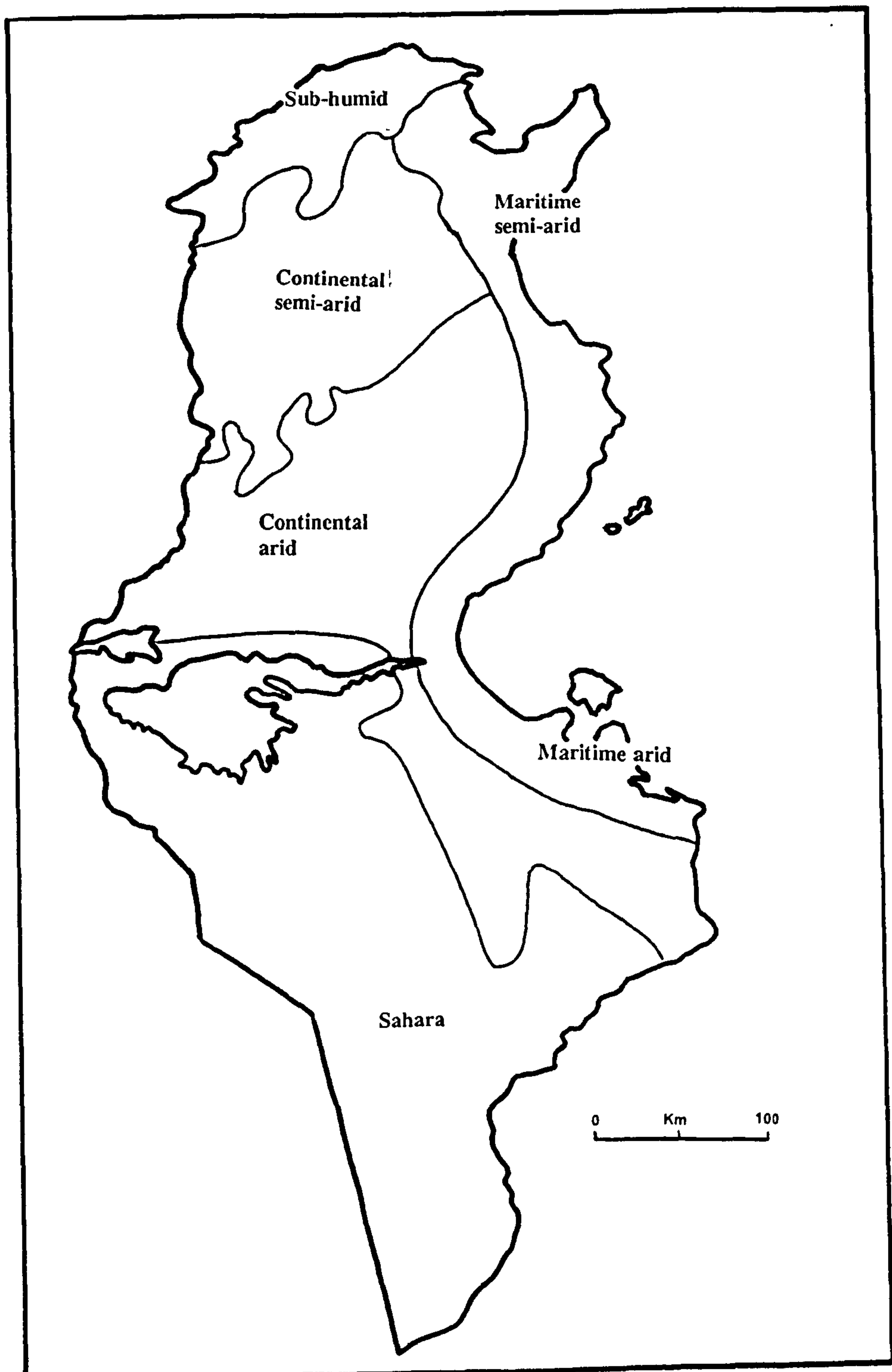


Figure 2.3 Climatic regions. Source: Fakhfakh, M. (Ed.)(1979)
Atlas de Tunisie Paris: Jeune Afrique

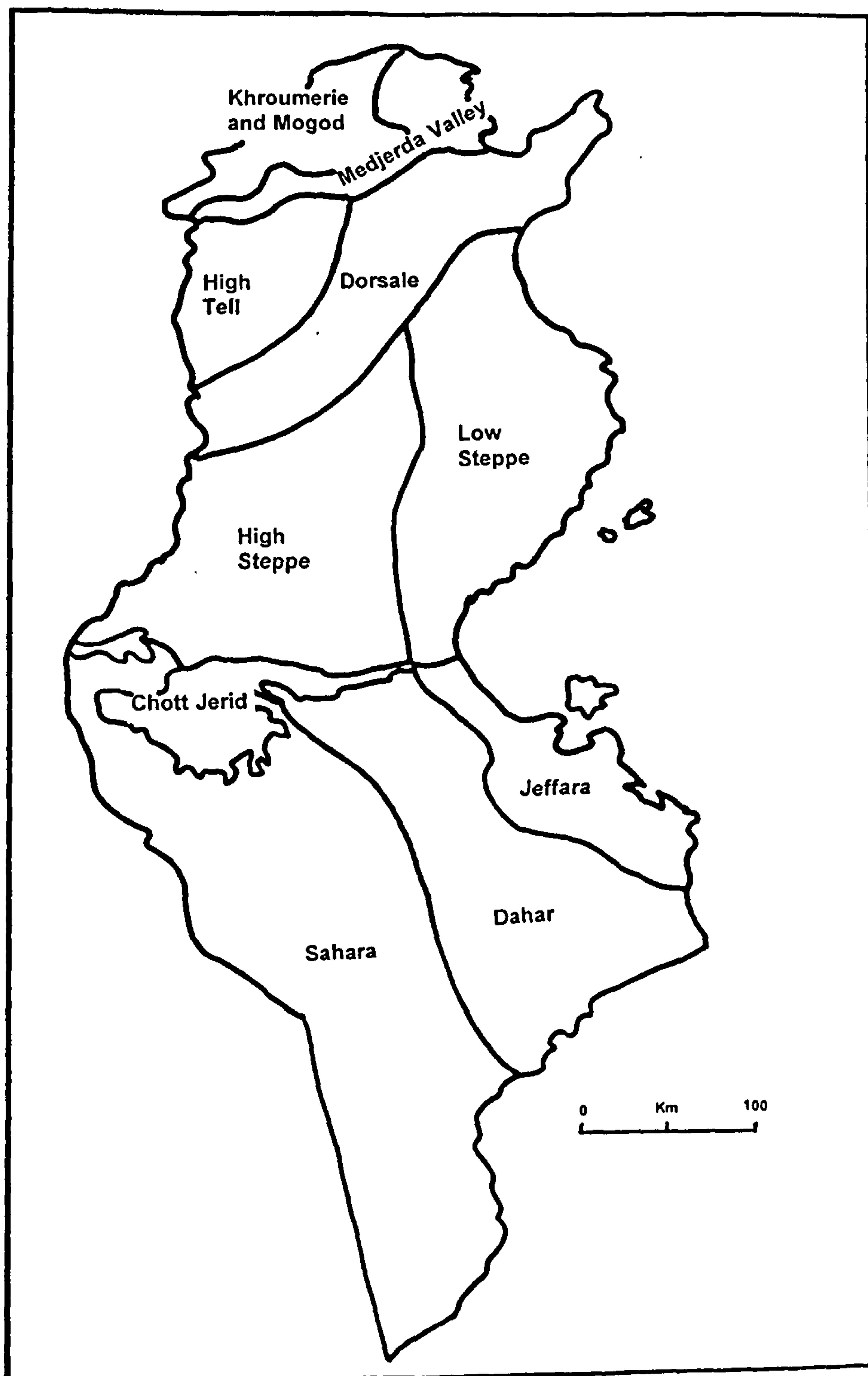


Figure 2.4 Physiographic regions

prevalence of maritime air masses in the north and east throughout the year means that absolute temperatures and diurnal variations are lower near the coast than in the interior, where altitude and the predominance of continental air masses mean summers are generally hotter and winters colder than along the coast, particularly at the higher altitudes to the west. Throughout the north, however, annual rainfall exceeds 400mm per annum, the minimum required to assure dry cereal cultivation.

The Dorsale mountain range (Figure 2.4) extending from the Algerian border in a north easterly direction from a point immediately north of Thala in the High Tell, towards the Cap Bon peninsula, separates the more temperate climate of northern Tunisia from the more arid steppe and desert regions to the south. The wet season, between seven and nine months in the Tell, becomes progressively shorter as the desert approaches lasting only three months in the High Steppe while in the far south the dry season is prolonged throughout the year. Ain Draham in the north has an average of 118 days rain while this is reduced to only 90 days at Maktar in the High Tell and 29 at Kebili on the fringes of the northern Sahara.⁴

In the steppe, rainfall averages between 400mm and 200mm per annum, the former isohyet marking the southern edge of stable dry cereal cultivation while the latter corresponds to the lower limit required for unirrigated olive growing. South of the Gafsa chain of mountains the sub-desertic region is defined by average rainfall between 100mm and 200mm per year only slightly exceeded in the higher altitudes of the Matmata mountains. Further inland where the moderating influence of the sea disappears rainfall falls to 94mm at Tozeur, 89mm at Kebili and 70mm at Ramada close to the Libyan border.⁵

But these averages mask a great unpredictability in both the timing and amount of precipitation. In the northern Tell where rainfall varies by only 1:2.5, in the south this

⁴ Kassab, A. and Sethom H. (1980), *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁵ Mensching, H. (Ed.)(1985) *Klimatographie - Nordafrika*, p.71.

becomes 1:4 and even 1:5.⁶

In the south when the rain does come it is often heavily concentrated in time. While in the Tell rainfall is predominantly orographic producing a more constant and fine rain, in the south and centre the prevalence of convectional rainfall produces heavy but short stormy downpours particularly in autumn with the arrival of the cold front from north. These often have a catastrophic impact on agriculture and livestock causing severe flooding of wadi (or dry river) bottoms.

The low level of rainfall, its seasonal and annual unpredictability and the often devastating effects of heavy storms make agriculture throughout the south and centre of Tunisia an extremely uncertain activity. This is further complicated by temperatures which register high seasonal and diurnal variations especially inland and at high altitudes. At Gafsa the average temperature in the hottest month, July, is 29.5 degrees centigrade while in the coldest month, January, it is only 9 degrees centigrade. The hottest, and driest, months of summer are also those which have the greatest evaporation rates which reach 1,122mm in the interior at Gafsa although much less on the coast, being 836mm at Sfax.

The effects of the hot dry sirocco winds emanating from the Sahara in spring and summer, scorch the lands pushing temperatures up and drying the air considerably. The north does not escape the sirocco but while Bizerte endures it on average only 3 to 10 days a year in the south it blows anything from 5 to 30 days.

Soils generally follow the climate in their adaptability to agriculture. In the north, above the 400mm isohyet, there are pedological conditions similar to other coastal Mediterranean regions: light brown and greyish brown carbonate soils of medium depth, partly relict, comparatively well watered on the mountain slopes and in the Medjerda valley. In the steppe the soils are thin and powdery, with a low organic content. These are light brown calcareous semi-desert soils, silty and clayey sands with

⁶ Kassab, A. and Sethom H. (1980), *op. cit.*, p. 53.

an upper horizon removed by wind erosion. In the south, below the 100mm isohyet, there are sandy or gravelly soil-like desert sediments, highly saline fringing the chotts.

2.3 The Population in Pre-Protectorate Tunisia

Although no general census was undertaken in Tunisia until 1921, Ganiage has estimated the population at 1.1 million people in 1861 basing his figure on the registers of the poll tax (the medjba) which was reintroduced by the Beylicate in 1856.⁷ As Valensi points out this would ascribe the country an extremely low average population density of less than ten inhabitants per square kilometre.⁸

Although the influence of historical and cultural factors in shaping the human geography of pre-Protectorate Tunisia is incontestable, environmental and climatic factors played a significant role in the spatial distribution and overall size of the population. The overwhelming majority of the population was rural, nomads far outweighed sedentarists and the urban population was extremely small. Valensi posits that the urban population was limited to a maximum of only 16% of the total in the mid-nineteenth century, much less when it is considered that many of these urban dwellers were also engaged in agriculture and horticulture.⁹ The towns themselves were tiny, often indistinguishable from villages. Even the population of Tunis, by far the largest urban centre, is thought to have numbered only 80,000 in the 1860's.¹⁰ Ganiage put the entire settled population at a little less than half of the total although he clearly includes in that figure a large number of northern inhabitants who were only partially settled.¹¹

Whatever may have been its size in general the settled population was concentrated in

⁷ Ganiage, J. (1964) pp. 165-198.

⁸ Valensi, L. (1977) p. 4.

⁹ Valensi, L., *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 5.

¹¹ Ganiage, J. (1964) *op. cit.*, p. 171.

the regions more favoured by environmental conditions. In the more humid climes of northern Tunisia, north of the Dorsale, besides Tunis and the port city of Bizerte were located the towns of Kef, Beja, Teboursouk, Mateur, Testour and Tebourba. Around them, in what was once the granary of the Roman Empire, cereal cultivation predominated supplying the towns and feeding foreign trade. In the arid environments to the south of the Dorsale the settled population was largely limited to more humid coastal regions where the proximity of the sea helped temper the climatic excesses which affected the interior. Along the southern coast the towns and villages of Monastir, Mahdia, Sousse, Msaken, Sfax and Gabes, were the country's main areas of olive and olive oil production. Apart from the eastern littoral there were few settled people in the south and centre interior of the country whether in urban areas or not. Only Kairouan, an important religious centre in the low steppe, and the well irrigated and fertile date producing oases of Tozeur and Nefta in the far south, were centres of any importance. Outwith this Gafsa was the only town of size throughout the interior, south of the Dorsale mountains.

The majority of the population consisted of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoral tribes living, in the main, from their animals and engaging in agriculture to an extent which varied according to their geographic milieu, prevailing climatic circumstances and their ability to procure seed with which to plant. Although the social and historical origins of the pastoral tribes were influential, pastoralism was above all else an adaptation to the environment.

With little access to groundwater and rudimentary production techniques agricultural production was either impossible or highly risky throughout most of the country especially in the semi-arid and arid south. In these regions the success or failure of cereal harvests depended almost entirely on the capriciousness of rainfall, winds, temperatures. Perhaps even more important than quantity, it was the timing of rainfall which determined the fate of cereal harvests. Rain was required at critical points in the agricultural year, in autumn for the germination of the seed and in the spring during the period of growth to allow the young plants to reach maturity. But in the south and central regions rainfall was too unpredictable to provide any security over the outcome

of sowings. If the rains were late the germination process could be delayed too near to the season of frosts. If there was not enough rainfall much of the seed would be lost while too much rainfall could wash them away in the fields. But even after the most favourable autumn and winter conditions the young plants were at the mercy of the devastating effects of spring downpours and hailstorms. If the crops survived intact through to late spring when the harvest was completed in most of the south, there remained the common and real threat from infestations of locusts which could, in one day, destroy the entire crop.

Under these circumstances agriculture could not be the primary occupation of the vast majority of the population in nineteenth century Tunisia. Even in the north of the country where cereal cultivation was of much greater significance to the semi-nomadic groups animal raising, principally of sheep, was everywhere a basic economic activity and the agro-pastoral balance tilted progressively in favour of livestock from the north towards the Dorsale although not in a well defined linear gradation.

The harsher lands to the south of the Dorsale, inland from the coast, was the almost exclusive domain of the pastoral nomad and semi-nomad tribes. Throughout the low steppe and the high steppe and the entire southern districts the people lived a life of constant movement seeking pasture for the animals, particularly in the hot, dry summer months when the land became parched due to the lack of rain, the high temperatures and the southerly winds from the Sahara. The type of animals kept tended to vary from region to region. In the steppe sheep predominated while camels were relatively few. Moving progressively southward the number of goats and camels increased, both being better able to withstand the more difficult environmental circumstances. In a similar direction the distances over which the population moved with their herds also increased in a direct relationship with the abundance of natural resources. None of these groups, however, lived entirely from their animals. All the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes cultivated some land, no matter how limited, cereals providing an important dietary supplement, and variety, as well as being a means of exchange. But unlike in the north, where wheat was the most commonly sown, in the south the hardier barley crop was the rule. The sowing of crops in autumn brought the nomadic tribes back to their

own lands after the long wanderings of the summer months where they generally stayed, or stayed close by, until the after the harvest in spring.¹²

For a rural society like Tunisia of the nineteenth century, climate was the great dictator of the prosperity of the population. Drought was an ever present threat as was the often inevitable consequences of famine, particularly after successive years of hardship. But a corollary to drought and famine was disease which was almost endemic in Tunisia as in the rest of north Africa. Valensi believes, based on contemporary accounts, which she admits can only be used as guides, that the population may have varied by a factor as much as two, depending on the state of successive harvests, the incidence and intensity of disease and the level of Government taxation.¹³ While this is impossible to verify, environmental conditions in south and central Tunisia were extremely difficult and unpredictable and given the rudimentary production techniques, available agriculture was entirely marginal and extensive pastoralism was the principal economic activity.

2.4 Social Relations and the Relationship with the State

Located in the more fertile and climatically more favoured regions, the towns of Tunisia and their immediate hinterlands, were centres of urban and agricultural specialization, of mainstream religion, government and of trade.

Although almost entirely bereft of industry despite the, admittedly feeble, attempts made to establish modern manufacturing capacity along western lines under Ahmad Bey, the economy of these regions was quite strongly commercialized. There was a lively and active craft industry, notably chechias in and around Tunis and a variety of textiles of which the southern oases of the Djerid were particularly renowned, and agricultural production was generally for sale in the market and money was a familiar medium of transactions. All the towns and most of the villages had at least one market where local and regional specialities, both agricultural and artisanal, were

¹² See Clarke, J.I. (1956).

¹³ Valensi, L. (1977), p. 3.

commercialized as were those of other regions within Tunisia and those from other countries.

Demand from the towns stimulated production of agricultural produce but so too did government taxation and foreign trade. Imports of foreign, mainly manufactured, goods both for local consumption and for resale in southern Algeria and the Sahara, were offset by exports of primarily agricultural goods, principally cereals from the north of the country and olives/olive oil from the towns and villages of the east coast. In a country where labour and access to water, rather than land, were the scarce factors of production, private and individual or family landownership, legally defined and notarized, was only to be found in the settled regions. This was particularly so in the olive growing villages of the Sahel where the influence of foreign trade in oil was extremely strong. The scarcity of land suitable for horticulture together with the size of the investment required and the length of time necessary before the trees came to full production, meant that there was a marked degree of private property. Although most village dwellers owned at least a small plot of land there were clear disparities in economic wealth something which is clearly evident from Valensi's study of Msaken in the mid nineteenth century.¹⁴ One of about fifty small villages in the Sahel region around Sousse and Monastir, Msaken was both a holy place and one strongly tied to foreign trade. Containing about 2,436 individual properties and 236,000 olive trees in the 1840's Msaken was the centre of olive production in the Regency.¹⁵ With the average property consisting of about 97 trees, the category of owners with between 81 and 120 trees was quite small, being only slightly over 10%. The majority of wealth was polarized at the two extremes, large property owners (owning more than 120 trees) accounting for 20% of all the properties and nearly 70% of the trees. At the other extreme 40% of the landowners possessed less than 40 trees.¹⁶ There was a clear and close relationship between urban centres and the rural, settled peasant producers in the countryside. A sizeable proportion of the larger properties were owned by citizens of

¹⁴ Valensi, L. (1977), *op. cit.*, chapter 3.

¹⁵ Valensi, L., *op. cit.*, p. 92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Kairouan, Sousse and Tunis.

In the southern oases of the Djerid, where date production dominated the economy despite the presence of an important artisanal textile production, private property was also the norm. Land was bought and sold but here access to water for irrigation was even more important than land, since the latter was almost worthless in the hot and dry climate bordering the desert, without good irrigation. Water rights, therefore, developed separately to land rights and as Henia's excellent study shows, there were substantial differences in wealth and social standing amongst the inhabitants of these oases depending on the quality of the land, the quantity of water rights held, and to the different types of date trees owned.¹⁷

Unlike the Sahel and the Djerid, in the north of the country land was more abundant and the pressures to take out private property titles much less severe. Nevertheless this was, in general, also a very fertile region with good rainfall, ideally suited to cereal cultivation. While small in relation to the total land area, private property, which was concentrated around the towns such as Beja, Mateur, Bizerte, and the fruit growing areas such as the Cap Bon peninsula, was by no means unusual. But here it tended to take the form of medium and large properties, or "henchirs", owned by the Bey himself, his family, or absentee urban dignitaries and often habous land which had been dedicated to some pious foundation either by a previous owner or by the Bey.¹⁸ The peasants who worked these henchirs were called "khammes", receiving one fifth of the harvest in return for their labour and these were often aided at harvest time by salaried labour. Cherif makes clear that in some cases the Bey retained full ownership rights to the land which he exploited, under the auspices of a manager, or "waqf", using khammes, providing assistance in procuring the seed, the costs of harvesting and in transporting the grain to state granaries. In other cases a simple rent, which did not necessarily correspond to the production potential of the land, was charged to the

¹⁷ Henia, A. (1980) pp. 81-82.

¹⁸ See Cherif, M. H. (1980) pp. 21-55.

occupants.¹⁹ More usually, however, the Bey sold, or farmed out, the management of the properties under a form of concession known as "iqta" to local notables who in turn assumed the rights to a certain proportion of the harvest.²⁰

Wealth amongst the urban and settled populations was not evenly distributed. A small number of large landowners and a commercial elite composed of native Arabs and Jews, together with a European mercantile community which became increasingly influential from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were clearly differentiated economically from the mass of small proprietors and producers and from those who did not own land but worked as share-croppers.²¹

Despite the clear economic differentiation in the settled regions, Valensi argues that there was "a certain unity in the social status" of the inhabitants on the basis that whether rich or poor the Tunisian peasant maintained, for the most part, access to land and equipment and, therefore, was not dispossessed of ownership of the means of production even if the poorer inhabitants were also forced, by economic circumstance, to offer their labour to larger landowners.²² She maintains that the meagre size of properties, even those of the larger owners, together with primitive production techniques made the development of any agrarian capitalism impossible.²³ While this may be true of the peasantry as a whole, we agree with Cherif that the sedentarized and urban population can be described as the "zone rurale 'evoluee'", exhibiting a much more marked tendency toward social differentiation and economic stratification than

¹⁹ Zghal, A. (1980) pp. 16-17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²¹ Valensi points out that the share-cropper, or khammes, on one of the larger olive producing properties in the Sahel may well have been better off than the owner of a very small property. Valensi (1977), *op. cit.*, p. 90.

²² Valensi, L. (1977) *op. cit.*, p. 77.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 77. Valensi argues that even the concept of large property owners is deceptive since their lands were, in the villages of the Sahel, widely dispersed in fragments. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

those of the nomadic populations in the interior.²⁴

The distinction between settled and nomadic was more than simply a difference between an agricultural population and a pastoral one, between settled and mobile. Unlike the western dichotomy which pitched urban against rural social consciousness, north African society reflected a cultural difference which united the urban citizen with the settled peasantry in contrast with the nomads. As Cherif says, "Les hommes du XVII^e siècle étaient sensibles aux diversités ethniques et culturelles: Turks, citadins (baldi), bedouins (arabs). Ce sont...les réalités de l'époque".²⁵

This cultural distinction between baldi and bedouin is recreated in north African political theory which recognizes a parallel variation in the strength of the power of central government which Coon describes thus:

"In the cities and lowland or flatland villages, the government ruled. Out in the deserts, or up in the mountains, authority lies in the hands of the tribes....In Morocco these two zones, the closely and the loosely governed, are known by the Bled al-Makhzen and Bled es-Siba, meaning literally 'Government land' and 'land of Insolence'".²⁶

In Tunisia the settled regions and towns were where the Beylical government's authority was all-pervasive. The sedentary population of Tunisia inhabited a world in which order and stability were maintained by the Beylical government and its associates, a religious and a commercial/landowning elite. At the head of the political hierarchy the Bey had absolute power backed by a standing army based in the main towns. Beneath this his authority was dispensed amongst the population by a network of caids, or governors, cheikhs and other functionaries chosen from amongst the local notables. Although government patronage was fickle, both the appointment and derogation of duties being at the will of the Bey, there was a remarkable stability in the caidal structure with some wealthy and influential families performing the function from

²⁴ Cherif, M. H. (1984) p. 55.

²⁵ Cherif, M. H. (1984) p. 35.

²⁶ Cited in Anderson, L. (1981) pp. 41-42.

generation to generation.²⁷ In fact the position of caids and cheikhs was somewhat ambiguous. While in principle, representatives of the Bey amongst their people, in practice they retained a great deal of autonomy within their regions and the relationship with the Beylical government in Tunis was often more of an association than one of direct government service.

The principal preoccupation of the Beylical regime and its representatives, was the extraction of surplus value from the countryside and towns mainly in the form of taxation. The practice of farming out the government positions to the highest bidder ensured that only wealthy or socially powerful had access to power. This both encouraged stability in the government structure but also left the caids and cheikhs a good deal of autonomy with regards the level of taxation since they had to at least cover the costs paid to the Bey.

Henia describes the situation in the Djerid where the complexity of the local tax regimes was so great and variable from one village to the next, that the local notables were, until the end of the eighteenth century:

"...beaucoup plus de simples agents du Beylik. Bien au contraire, ils constituent une force locale - le pouvoir locale - avec laquelle le beylik est obligé de compter".²⁸

It is this contradiction between local notables seeking to maintain their control in their own region yet aware of the importance of an accommodation with, and patronage from, a central government which became increasingly preoccupied with the needs to raise more and more revenues from taxation from the early nineteenth century which was at the basis of evolving relations between the locality and the central government, between local authority and central control.²⁹

²⁷ See for example Demmersman, A. (1983) p. 79. The Djelloulis held the position of Caid at Sfax and Sousse for many generations the sons being trained for their future role.

²⁸ Henia, A., (1980) *op. cit.*, p. 337.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

This contradiction between central and local government is at the heart of the concept of makhzen and siba. In the former the government had overriding authority and the local notables, however independent in practice, acted within the framework of Beylical authority. As the fiscal requirements of the beylical regime increased with the financial crises of the nineteenth century, the local power base was eroded as new and standardized taxes were introduced in the Djerid, as elsewhere, which de-mystified the particularities of local government and brought the central government in more direct contact with the population.

In Tunis the "siba" was limited to the pastoral nomads, tribal groups living beyond the immediate control of central government. Major Sir Grenville Temple describing his excursion to the small settlement of Feriana near the Algerian border in 1835, wrote:

"...this place is situated on the frontiers of Algiers and Tunis and the Arabs who live near it are of a lawless disposition acknowledging no obedience either to the one government or the other".³⁰

The cultural divide, which separated the peaceable citizen and peasant protected by and subjugated to the Beylical regime, from the dissident and warrior, pastoral and tribal populations of the interior, is a reflection of the power of the central government. Amongst the tribes, the state's role was essentially limited to the periodic extraction of taxes. Lacking either the military capability, the financial means or even the political will to effectively control these groups, the despatch of an annual tax gathering caravan, or mahalla, was seen as a satisfactory way of ensuring a semblance of tribal allegiance to the sovereignty of the Tunisian Bey.

In such a situation, therefore, it is the state's role as a tax collecting authority which is often seen as the principal determinant of relations between the settled zones and the nomadic populations:

³⁰ Temple, Major Sir G.T. (1835) p. 217.

"...the difference between mahkzan and siba was essentially one of payment or 'withholding' of taxes; and the polar relationships between these two concepts is without any doubt the central fact of the political sociology of pre-Protectorate Morocco".³¹

The tribes sought to avoid the payment of any such taxes to an external power whose authority they did not recognize, while the Bey's principal aim in attempting to enforce their payment was largely based on the desire to strengthen their links to the Regency of Tunis rather than to the government of Algiers to the west or Tripolitania in the south. This resulted in the apparent division of the country into two almost wholly independent states which Blacquiere observed during a journey to Tunis in 1813:

"South of the range of mountains called Gibbel Mejerdah, which terminates the Regency of Tunis, you enter the country of Dates. The limits of this extensive and highly productive region are not known; however the Bey draws a very considerable revenue from the inhabitants; when the camp is sent out for the purpose of collecting the tribute, they only penetrate from one to two hundred miles into the interior, and from the inhabitants of a few large towns the contribution is extremely productive...it does not appear that they have any peculiar attachment to their Tunisian neighbours; but the Bey's superiority obliges them to cultivate his friendship. It cannot however be said that the country forms an integral part of his Highness's dominion as they are governed by their own laws, but subject to his revision and only pay the tribute to avoid greater evil".³²

Lacking any well established network of representation of its authority in the siba through which the collection of taxes could be achieved the Government relied not only on its own personnel, particularly the army, but recruited help from amongst the tribes. Thus certain tribes, such as the Drid in Tunisia, were granted exemption from the need to pay some classes of taxes as payment for their help in arranging and organizing the tribute from neighbouring tribal fractions.

Gellner refines the basic dichotomy between makhzen and siba by incorporating the central government's association with groups inhabiting the siba, stating that:

³¹ Hart, D. (1972) p. 26.

³² Blacquiere, E. (1813) p. 139.

"...the country could be seen as composed of three concentric circles: the Inner Circle of tribes who extracted taxes, the Middle Circle of tribes who had taxes extracted from them, and the Outer Circle of tribes who did not allow taxes to be extracted from them. In other words, there were the sheep dogs, the sheep and the wolves".³³

This essentially timeless opposition of mahkzen and siba in which neither was willing, or able, to gain lasting superiority was seen as the basis of the relationship between the state and the tribes over a period of many centuries giving rise to what is described as "an oscillating frontier".

There is little doubt that the influence of central government in Tunis was limited amongst the tribal nomads, a situation which is reflected in constitution of the Beylicate's income in the early nineteenth century. In 1813-14, revenue from the interior of the country accounted for barely two-fifths of the government's total income.³⁴ Of this the contributions of the various regions were unequal the overwhelming majority being extracted from the agriculturally advantaged zones, the population in the hinterlands of Tunis-Bizerte accounting for 26.39%, the Jerid (land of dates), 24.78% and the northwest, 11.57%. Chater notes that only 2.19% of the Bey's receipts from the interior came from ethnic caidats amongst the tribes.³⁵

To Gellner and writers of Tunisian history such as Valensi, this apparent political autonomy of tribal north Africa forms the framework for a deeper understanding of the nature of such societies in that it is seen as at one and the same time a product of and a reinforcement to, a system of internal social organization which was based on fundamentally different principles to those which characterized the settled populations. Without the structure and direction provided by the Bey's administration in Tunis, order and social cohesion in tribal society was maintained through the mechanical operation of a kinship based segmentary lineage system which for its continued existence

³³ Gellner, E. (1972) p. 3.

³⁴ Chater, K. (1984) p. 90.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 90.

demanded and propagated an extreme form of social egalitarianism and economic equality.

2.5 Segmentary Lineage Theory and Tribal Society

The theory of social relations and political structures of tribal groups in north Africa owes much to the work of E.E. Pritchard's amongst the bedouin of Cyrenaica,³⁶ the central theses of which have been taken up and refined to form the core of studies of Moroccan tribal society by a number of political scientists, most notably Ernest Gellner.³⁷

In this literature tribal social relations are defined by kinship ties with groups to which an individual belonged being defined by a series of male ancestors from the level of the individual to the level of the tribe where all lineages converged on one common ancestor. The individual is therefore found at the centre of a series of concentric, nested, circles whose boundaries never touch, such that:

"The innermost circle will consist of the independent household; the next circle the group of households sharing a real or supposed common ancestor, and defining a little clan; the next circle a bigger clan unit or a whole village, and so forth".³⁸

These concentric circles, or segments, and the kinship ties upon which they rested, form the basis of Evans-Pritchard's extremely elegant theory of segmentarity which Gellner and others have employed to explain how social cohesion can be maintained, almost mechanically, in societies devoid of a centralized, hierarchical form of government. Gellner notes that the:

³⁶ Evans-Pritchard, E. (1949).

³⁷ Gellner, E. (1969) p. 63.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

"...idea underlying [this] theory is that the functions of maintaining cohesion, social control [and] some degree of 'law and order'...can be performed with tolerable efficiency, simply by the 'balancing' and 'opposition' of constituent groups".³⁹

Each generation of ancestors i.e., each segment, is at once a point of cohesion between clans forming a part of a single tribal unit and also a point of rupture within which segmentary disputes can arise. Cohesion is achieved at each level by a threat from outside. Thus at the level of a clan a threat from outside will effect the solidarity of the units, or segments of which it is composed to meet and balance the opposition. As a result, there was no need for a centralized chieftainship. Pritchard sums it up best when he writes:

"Authority is distributed at every point of the tribal structure and political leadership is limited to a situation in which a tribe or a segment of it acts corporately. With a tribe this only happens in war or in dealings with an outside authority which, for its own purposes, recognises the tribe as an administrative unit. There cannot obviously be any absolute authority vested in a single sheikh of a tribe when the fundamental principle of tribal structure is opposition between its segments and in such segmentary systems there is no state and no government as we understand these institutions, and criminal law is absent and civil law exists only in a very rudimentary form".⁴⁰

Although tribal chiefs or sheikhs did exist they were literally merely first among equals,⁴¹ their tenure dependent on the support of his kin group and immediately revocable on the decision of the adult males of the tribal unit. The higher the level of his responsibility the broader were the groups to which his authority depended and, therefore, the less secure his position. As Gellner points out:

"...the mode of election is such as could hardly be bettered if one wishes to prevent the emergence of permanently dominant individuals or subgroups".⁴²

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴⁰ Evans-Pritchard (1949) p. 56.

⁴¹ Valensi, L. (1977) p. 83.

⁴² Gellner (1969) p. 82.

The social egalitarianism produced in such a segmentary society as that outlined above is further enhanced, according to Gellner, by the role of the "Saints" or religious lineages. As Gellner accepts, at the lowest level of the individual or family and at the highest level of the tribe, there can exist no authority capable of regulating disputes.

However, Gellner holds that at these margins of a segmentary society cohesion is assured by the function of the "Saints" for which the normal rules are, as it were, turned on their head:

"....the relative segmentary purity of the lay tribes is made possible by the saints: these inegalitarian, stratified, pacific, "artificial" outsiders perform functions which enable the egalitarian, feud-addicted tribesmen to work their remarkably pure segmentary system. Here a separation of powers is not merely a check on tyranny, as intended in classical political theory, but also as a check on inequality. The inegalitarian potential of the society is, as it were, drained by the saints".⁴³

It is important to note, though, that the "inegalitarian potential" of the society in the economic sphere was not seen to be great in the first place. The kinship based segmentary lineage system, the political and social implications of which have been briefly described above, is held to have had equally important ramifications in the economic sphere. Indeed the economic organization plays as integral a part in the smooth running of the system as a whole as do the social and political underpinnings. In tribal society kinship ties and not the hierarchical and exploitative relationships of the settled zones are the principal determinants of productive relations, and collective, rather than individual rights and responsibilities are emphasised.⁴⁴ This is perhaps most clearly exemplified with regard to the nature of landownership and usage.

In contrast to the sedentarized regions where individual, private landownership

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 64. This is achieved at the most basic level through the giving of gifts to the religious tribes but it also acts as an integral part of the segmentary system by smoothing out problems where the mechanical operation of segmentarity fails.

⁴⁴ See Valensi (1977).

prevailed,⁴⁵ land was held collectively by the tribal units as a whole and recognized at each level of the social structure not by titles or deeds, but by custom and historical and cultural factors. Within these areas rights to cultivation or occupation of land came with usage and were bestowed on individual production units according to need. Production for the satisfaction of these needs was not determined primarily by market forces but by family consumption requirements. Largely subsistence orientated, these nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples lived from a mixture of pastoral and, to a varying extent, agricultural activities the precise nature of which was determined by local physical and climatic conditions as describes above.

Little of the product of tribal labour found its way on to the markets of the coastal towns. Yet as with any subsistence economy, an exchange of products did exist. The vagaries of climate and the different economic specializations within and between ecological regions, encouraged the complementary exchange of resources. In Tunisia inter-regional exchange essentially took the form of an exchange of surplus grain from the tribes of the Tell and the northern High Steppe, with the dates produced in the oases of the Djerid, where grain production was almost nonexistent. Thus each winter, large camel caravans would leave the north loaded with grain, some of which filtered through markets en route, but the majority of which was exchanged for dates in the oases.⁴⁶ Such exchanges were replicated between tribes in the same regions to help eradicate temporary deficits of subsistence products.⁴⁷

The patterns of the resulting exchanges was strongly influenced by tribal kinship ties and were facilitated by a network of daily, weekly and periodic markets often located

⁴⁵ Either in the form of small, individually owned units (melk) as was common in the olive growing coastal regions of the Sahel for example, or of the large government controlled estates (iqta) in the grain producing regions north of the Dorsale mountains.

⁴⁶ The precariousness of grain production for many tribes meant that harvests were not always sufficient to provide surpluses with which to exchange for dates. Nevertheless transactions were maintained by the provision of credit facilities by the sedentarists of the oases to the semi-nomads on the basis of future grain harvests.

⁴⁷ M 'Halla, M. (1979).

at the confluence of rights of way or of different tribal territories.⁴⁸ As well as being an important place of economic interaction these markets also provided the principal forum for social and political interaction amongst fractions of the same tribe and between tribes, the markets frequented and the exchange relations undertaken being largely dictated by kinship or tribal ties.⁴⁹

Kinship ties also provided the basis for the other great form of economic interaction of tribal life: the annual transhumance of animal herds in search of pasture. In the summer when lack of rainfall made pasture in the south and steppe difficult to find, the tribes would move north into the Sahel and the Tell where pasture would usually be sufficient to assure the needs of their animals. The reverse would happen in the winter when northern tribes sent their animals south or into Algeria. These annual movements were on the basis of kinship or other tribal allegiances. Thus the Ouerghemma in the far south would find pasture in the Aradh, and with the Neffet and Mehedba in the low steppe around Sfax. The Madgeur and Frachiche travelled to the Tell and into Algeria.⁵⁰

2.6 Criticisms of Segmentary Lineage Theory

Segmentary lineage theory has played a dominant role in the analysis of the tribal populations of north Africa over the last thirty or so years. It has much to commend it as its staying power as a framework for analysis would suggest. In an extremely elegant way, it has established a framework for understanding how social cohesion can be maintained in societies where no central government exists. In doing so it has highlighted the political, economic and social underpinnings of a tribal society and thus emphasized that it can only be understood as a unified whole. It is to this which Valensi refers when she writes of Tunisia:

⁴⁸ See Benet, F. (1957).

⁴⁹ See Mikesell, M. (1958) and Fogg, W.(1935).

⁵⁰ See Clarke, J.I. (1956).

"Les tribus tunisiennes constituent bien, pour consequent, une societe du type segmentaire ou la politique, l'histoire et l'economie, sont exprimees en termes de genealogie; ou les relations politiques son fonction de la distance genealogique. Segmentaire egalement, car y fonctionnent conjointement la fusion - unite de territoire de filiation - et la fission l'equilibre n'est maintenue que dans la tension interne, et le groupe se definit et se conserve par son hostilite a des groups homologiques".⁵¹

Nevertheless the adoption or, at the least, the uncritical acceptance of this highly schematised model as a true reflection of the reality of Tunisian tribal society is fraught with conceptual difficulties. The heavy emphasis on a sharp dichotomy between makhzan and siba, state and tribe, settled and nomadic, in many ways merely reproduces the crude division between the "modern" and "traditional" of dualist development theories. By characterizing tribal society as politically autonomous, socially egalitarian and economically isolated from broader processes of development affecting the country as a whole, segmentary lineage theory effectively denies it any internal dynamic of change. Those changes wrought in the makhzan by an increasing integration into the rapidly evolving world capitalist economy, particularly during the nineteenth century, are seen to have little or no effect on the isolated, "backward" tribal populations where an "archaic mode of production" persisted.⁵² The separation of the two sectors is complete.

Furthermore the time element is eliminated from the study. As Seddon points out with regards Moroccan tribal society:

"...four centuries of Moroccan history can be schematically reduced, without doing violence to the evidence, to an essentially stable perpetuum in mobile, or oscillating system consisting oftwo elements makhzan and siba".⁵³

⁵¹ Valensi, L. (1977) p. 58.

⁵² See Valensi, L. and R. Gallisot (1968).

⁵³ Seddon, D. (1977) p. 28.

To Gellner tribal society was maintained in "a kind of sociological ice-box"⁵⁴ the dissolution of which awaited the political integration of the siba in the makhzan which was effected with the establishment of formal political structures by the colonial powers.

From here it is but a short and convenient step to equate the beginnings of economic and social change, i.e., the degradation of the pre-capitalist social formation, with the sudden establishment of foreign political control. This has led one historian to claim recently that within tribal Tunisia, there was "un immobilisme sociale qui se modifie peu de l'Antiquité à nos jours".⁵⁵

Clearly such a statement exaggerates the extent to which tribal Tunisia was immune to change and in recent years support for the need to re-evaluate some of the basic precepts of the Gellner thesis has come from a number of scholars critical of the ahistorical nature and universal applicability of segmentary lineage theory to the study of tribal north Africa. This has specifically centred on the validity of the idea of tribal political autonomy and social egalitarianism, the twin pillars upon which the model's edifice has been built.

2.7 The Myth of Egalitarianism

Abdallah Hammoudi's criticism of segmentary theory rests on the results of his study of those same tribal communities in the Moroccan High Atlas upon which Gellner's work was based. While acknowledging the importance of genealogy and kinship ties in the social fabric of the tribes, Hammoudi nevertheless highlights areas where the reality of social relation is too complex to be incorporated within the rigid, simplistic

⁵⁴ Gellner (1972) p. 60: The four criteria Gellner posits as determining the erosion of tribal cohesion in north Africa are:

1. The date of colonial conquest.
2. The type of colonial administration and the policies applied.
3. The geographic milieu of the tribal group i.e., whether from the plains or the mountains.
4. The extent of economic implantation of the colonial power.

⁵⁵ Arnoulet, F. (1984) p. 31.

assumptions of the theory. Specifically, he focuses on the position of groups whose genealogy is different to that of the larger unit of which it forms a part. This, he shows, was an extremely common phenomenon in the High Atlas which can occur either by the accretion of groups which have somehow become detached from their own lineage or simply by the conquering of one group by a more powerful aggressor. As an example he cites the case of the Ait Atta which conquered many of the oases of Dra, where they subsequently settled. As a result, the villages were renamed to reflect the historical origins of the conquering group.⁵⁶

More importantly the two lineages which divided the population of the villages bore the name of their Berber ancestors. The aggressors, however, were Arabs. Under such conditions, Hammoudi claims, the "foreign" or dominated groups became clients to the dominant lineages. As a result, while sharing the burden of all the main charges and responsibilities of the group as a whole, they suffered discrimination over such matters as access to water rights.

Whether temporary or permanent residents, foreign groups lived in a position of inferiority in relation to the group to which they were now attached. With regard to Tunisia, Baduch has attested the significance of such a basic cleavage within the tribes of the south. Many of the lowliest functions within a tribe were performed by "foreign" groups. In the Nefzaoua, for example, shepherds (or camelherds) came almost entirely from the Rebaia tribe. A lineage of the maraboutic tribe of the Merarique, well respected at the oasis of Douz in the Nefzaoua, which had settled amongst the Beni Zid, occupied the most menial positions of shepherds and guards for the livestock of the Beni Zid. The majority of shepherds of a tribe's animals came from such foreign groups.⁵⁷

One of the clearest examples of social division was between black and whites, the

⁵⁶ For example, the village of Asrir was taken by Ilemshane and renamed Asrir n'Ilemshane.

⁵⁷ S.H.A.T. Notes succinctes sur le Nefzaoua par M.M. Nancy, Lieutenant du Service des Affaires Indigenes, Kebili, November 1, 1904, p. 16.

former occupying the lowest social category, often with little in the way of land and animals, and thus often forced to work as khammes, or salaried labour in agricultural activities in village communities.

Even within lineages, cleavages existed. Baduel gives the example of the distrust shown to the Zmazma of the Beni-Zid by others of the same blood.⁵⁸ In his study of various Tunisian tribes during the eighteenth century, Cherif gives a more detailed description of socio-economic differences within and between tribes based on documents discovered in the beylical archives in Tunis.⁵⁹ Cherif initially focuses on more fundamental demographic inequalities which, he suggests, at a time when man is the main force of work and combat, were at the root of differences of wealth and power at all levels of tribal society. To illustrate this at the level of tribes, he points out that the tribe of the Zlass (Djlass) (Figure 2.5) was composed of up to 30,000-40,000 people; the Wirtaten tribe numbered 10,000-12,000; the Ouled Bou Salem, 3,500; the Mehedba 6,000; and the Trud less than 3,000.⁶⁰

These basic differences between tribes are just as striking at lower levels of the tribal structure, from fractions to the smallest family unit. Thus, amongst the Ouled Sindasen of the Zlass tribe, the largest fraction, the Ouled Skhib is subdivided into seven sub-fractions of which the average size is 90 males. Yet with the Ouled Yddis fraction of the same tribe, the average number of males to each sub-fraction is over 200. By contrast, the Ouled Bou Salem, sedentarists of the High Medjerda valley, is divided into fifteen fractions and sub-fractions, where the average is 55 men per unit.⁶¹ The Mehedba tribe of the low step in the hinterland of Skira is very different again with 260 being the average number of males per sub-group.⁶²

⁵⁸ Baduel (1981) p. 7.

⁵⁹ Cherif, M.H. (1981) pp. 291-310.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 300.

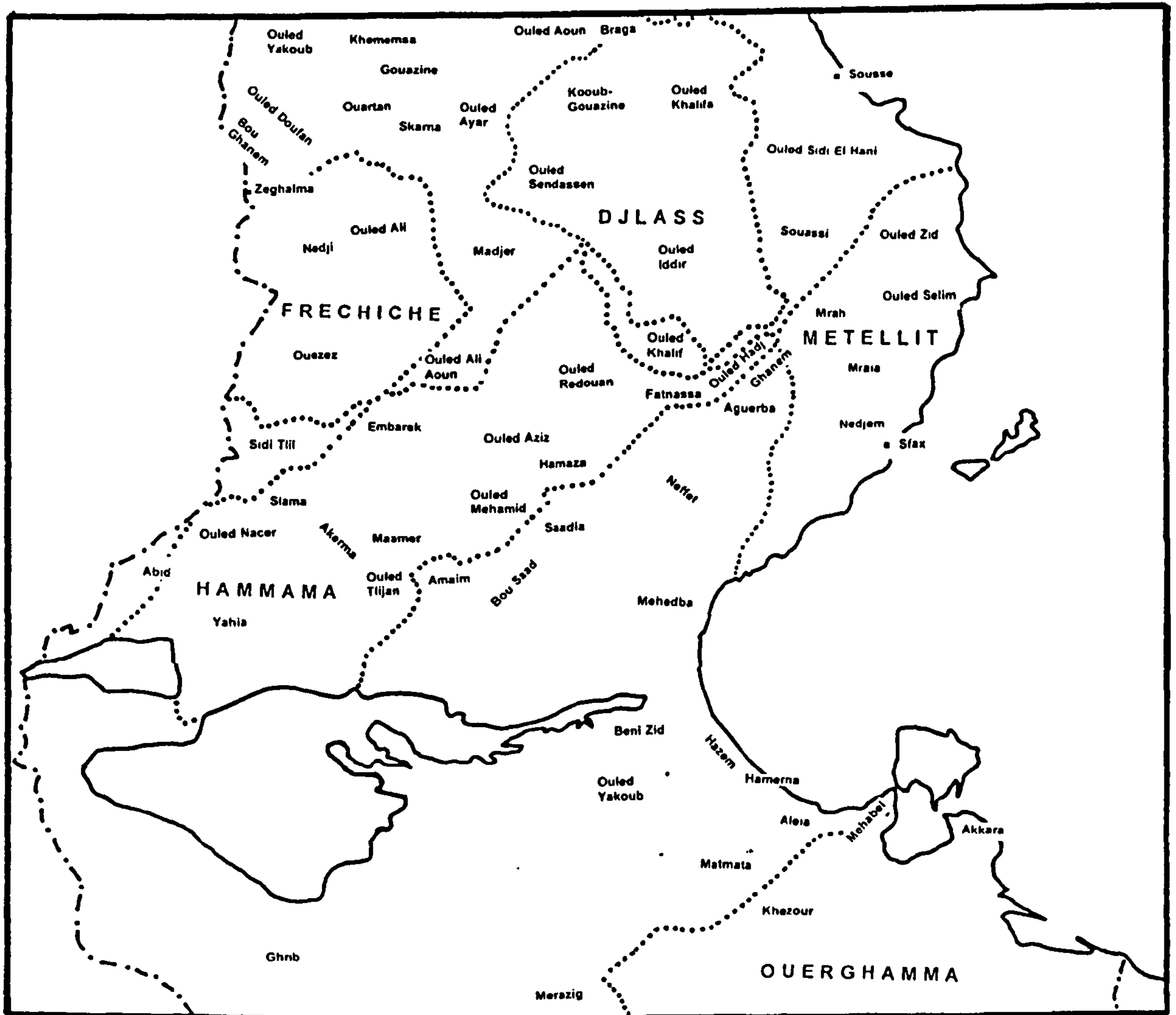


Figure 2.5 Tribal fractions. Source: Mensching, H. (Ed.)(1985)
Afrika - Kartenwerk, Serie N: Nordafrika Berlin:
 Gebrüder Borntraeger

Even at the smallest unit distinguished by the documents Cherif used, restrained family and its family head, the differences are readily apparent. Thus while groups of two and three families make up over three-quarters of all groups amongst the Zlass and the Ouled Bou Salem, amongst the Mehedba groups comprising four men and over constitute a relatively high percentage (43.5%) of the total. By contrast, the Trud has an average of 222 men per family group.

Aside from these basic demographic differences, Cherif's study also highlights a marked degree of economic inequality within and between the tribes examined.⁶³ The total population of the Ben-Salem which amounts to 3,500-4,000, have 1064 mecchias at their disposal, the equivalent of over 10,000 hectares. Less than 6% of the 296 family groups censured had the rights to over half the land area, with each property averaging 277 hectares. Properties of between 100 and 200 hectares account for a further one quarter of the land controlled by the tribe. So these two categories, making up one-eighth of family heads, own 71% of all land exploited by the tribes.⁶⁴ Once again the fortunes of lower order groups vary considerably.

As an example, Cherif focuses on the largest sub-division of the tribe, the Ouled Bou Hafna, comprising 52 families, and totalling 153 adult males. The cheikh of the Yahia bin Salah fraction of this tribe, was composed of the very high number of ten adult males, exploiting some 400 hectares and disposing of 25 oxen and 50 sheep, equal to nearly 40% of the group's land and 25% of its animal resources. Cherif noted similar divisions within the other fractions of the tribe. The Ouled Bou Salim, however, could be regarded as unrepresentative of tribes located further south in the high steppe since it occupied a fertile and well irrigated area of land in the climatically favoured high Medjerdah, and was heavily engaged in cereal cultivation. Furthermore, part of their produce was directed to the Genoese trading station at Tabarka and the French equivalent at Cap Negre, both of which were flourishing at this time. As Cherif

⁶³ Although the documents used only refer to groups holding at least twelve hectares of land and a few dozen heads of animals and therefore focus on the wealthier sections of tribes, the results nevertheless show the degree of economic differentiation.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

observes, sedentarization and contact with European commercial networks, "...peuvent rendre aisement compte des différentiations économiques fort importantes que nous avons observées".⁶⁵ Yet he goes on to show similar stratification amongst the mainly pastoral, semi-nomadic tribes of the Zlass and Mehadba. Taking the example of the Mkhaliif fraction of the Ouled Khalifa (Zlass), 15 % of the total population owned nearly one-half of the animals belonging to the group with an average per unit of 259 sheep. By contrast, 44% of the fraction's population accounted for less than 6% of the total animal resources of the fraction with an average holding per unit of eleven heads.

In sum, the social and economic egalitarianism of Gellner's theory, most forcibly supported in Tunisia by Valensi's analysis of the populations in the interior of the country must be viewed with a degree of scepticism and is, at best, a highly idealized reflection of the reality of tribal Tunisia. Social and economic differentiation was apparent at all levels of the tribal structure, irrespective of the economic base of tribal groups. We do not mean to imply by this either that these differences were as marked as those evident in the towns and amongst the settled peasantry or that a primitive accumulation of capital was evident amongst the tribes since that is clearly not the case. Kinship ties were of primary importance in determining social relations amongst a population for whom the economic potential of their land, with the technical means of production available, was limited. The social and economic cleavages which existed even in the eighteenth century when the weight of government taxation of the tribes was light, were to be intensified during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a direct result of the increased taxation of tribal Tunisia itself a product of the extension of the state's influence in the interior of the country.

2.8 The Degradation of Tribal Political Autonomy

There is no question that Tunisian tribes enjoyed a considerable amount of political autonomy from Beylical rule particularly those tribes, such as the Ouerghemma, Hammama and Beni Zid, more distant from Tunis. As was stated above, the weakness of the central authority's influence in these outlying regions is clearly shown in the

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

tribes' relatively weak contribution in the form of taxes to the state's treasury. Nevertheless, just as the sedentary regions had beylical governors representing the state's authority, so too did the tribes. By the beginning of Mohammed Es Sadok's reign in 1859 the number of ethnic caidats (i.e. caidats of tribes and not of territories) was estimated at forty.⁶⁶ Even the most distant and rebellious tribes of the Hammamma and Frachiche had governors whose main function was to assure the collection of taxes. Moreover, even as early as the late eighteenth century, the beylicate appointed Cadis or sharia religious judges to the confederation of the Hammama and Ouerghemma tribes.⁶⁷ Although their authority was limited, being secondary to internal or community laws, they represented an important extension of the central government's influence amongst the tribes.

The political autonomy of tribal Tunisia came under increasing pressure during the 1850's, 1860's and 1870's as the beylicate sought to enhance its presence among the southern tribes. This was partly borne of political motives to display to the French and Ottoman governments in particular its control over the politically sensitive border regions. By putting an end to the constant cross-border disputes of the tribes it was hoped to eliminate a potential means of legitimizing foreign intervention, though this was ultimately unsuccessful. More importantly, however, it reflects the treasury's rapidly deteriorating financial position which was posing a very real threat to the country's de facto independence. The sharply increased expenses from the reign of Ahmed Bey onwards resulting from the modernization of the army and attempts to establish western style manufacturing industry had brought mounting debts. This, ironically designed to ward off formal annexation by one of the powers, was subsequently systematically exploited by the latter, each of which sought to establish economic and political preeminence in the country. The mounting public debts and continued high levels of imports forced the Beylicate, in the attempt to shore up its ailing finances, to raise a greater proportion of income from the more systematic and thorough taxation of the population including the tribes. The result, particularly under

⁶⁶ Mahjoubi, A. (1977) p. 24.

⁶⁷ Cherif, M. H. (1986) tome II, p. 193.



Ahmed Bey and his successors, was the strengthening and extension of the caidal administration in the interior designed specifically to extract a greater surplus from the tribal populations.⁶⁸ The most extreme example of the Bey's attempts at extracting a greater surplus from the population was the doubling of the medjba (poll tax) in 1864, which led directly to a massive revolt, brutally repressed, of which the economic repercussions were profound.

Tribal Tunisia influenced, and was influenced by, the evolution of the central government in Tunis. Tribes had, for example, played an integral role in the opposition of the beys and the deys in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. What is evident is that where the tribes did come into conflict with the interests of the state, their attitude towards the latter was essentially manifested in their acceptance of a situation of deference towards it, rather than autonomy from it. The plethora of local uprisings and regional rebellions which characterised Tunisia under the beys were defined by a feeling that the intrusion of the state into their lives was too great, not that it was entirely unjustified.⁶⁹ Many of these uprisings, particularly during the nineteenth century, were protests against the fiscal exactions of the bey's representatives. The sentiments expressed were not so much anti-state but rather anti-too-much-state. They were, therefore, essentially reactionary movements which implicitly accepted the state's rights to extract taxes from them. The rebellion of 1864 for example, was the direct result of the doubling of the mejba, or poll tax, and the imposition by the Bey of Caids originating from without the tribes themselves.⁷⁰ There was no suggestion that the tribes were against the principle of Caidal authority; it simply reflected a desire to have local people fill those posts.

The scale of the revolt provides a clear indication of the potential for tribal solidarity

⁶⁸ The number of ethnic caidats created to oversee the tribes (as opposed to territorial caidats established amongst the sedentarists) was estimated at forty at the beginning of Mohamed Es Sadok's reign in 1859. Mahjoubi, A. (1977) p. 24.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Cherif, M.H. (1980).

⁷⁰ See Chater, K. (1978).

in Tunisia. Such was the strength of feeling against the measures that not only were the tribes unified in their opposition, but so too were large sections of the sedentary and urban population along the southern coast. Indeed the uprising was even supported by a large number of beylical representatives, the most famous being its leader Ali ben Ghadahem, caid of the Madger tribe, previously renowned as one of the state's staunchest allies.

The events of 1864, however, equally well illustrate the limitations of tribal solidarity and in particular the increasing influence of the state's authority and its ability to exploit ruthlessly, existing tribal divisions to its own ends. The rebellion was crushed by the army within a few months with severe repercussions on the economy of southern Tunisia.⁷¹

2.9 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter is not to show that tribal social relations were merely an underdeveloped form of those in the sedentarized region. This was clearly not the case. Social stratification existed to be sure, but it was hardly based on exploitation of one by another. Kinship ties formed the underpinnings of the social fabric and determined, to a large extent, political expression. Even in the years immediately prior to the establishment of the French Protectorate the tribal populations, particularly those more distant from the towns, did enjoy a marked degree of political autonomy.

Nevertheless it is important not to idealize these. Social and economic inequalities existed within and between tribes and these cleavages widened, particularly during the nineteenth century, as the increasing pressure on the Bey's finances led him to raise not only the general level of taxation but its scope as well. Even some of the remotest tribes which had been used to avoiding their payment found, by the 1860's, that their fiscal obligations were being more rigorously enforced. Continued tax rises and their more systematic collection in the interior, resulting from the expansion of the Bey's authority amongst the tribes served to heighten existing inequalities. Taxation, even

⁷¹ *Ibid.*.

amongst the town and peasant populations, was unequal, the rich and better off were less heavily taxed than the poor. The result during the mid-nineteenth century was the impoverishment of the more disadvantaged sections of tribal society for whom resources were too limited, or more correctly, too limited to rely on year after year, to be able to meet their obligations to the state. The situation was worsened in the two decades before the imposition of the Protectorate by a series of natural disasters, famines and plagues, which reduced large sections of the population to near ruin, scarcely able to survive let alone pay their taxes. It is this which created conditions propitious to the beginnings of the trade in alfa grass from 1870 which for the first time and on a large scale, linked the tribes of Tunisia directly with the European economy. Alfa grass grew throughout much of the south and centre of the country on land belonging to the tribes but until 1870 its use was limited to the fabrication of locally used products and for the pasture of animals. An understanding of the trade's origins subsequent development and its impact on tribal society requires an examination of social, political and economic conditions at a local, national and international level.

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Chapter Three

The Origins of the Alfa Trade in the United Kingdom

3.1 The British Paper Industry

The significant demand for alfa grass which emerged from the 1860's onwards, sprang from serious shortages of raw materials in the world's paper industry.

Until the late eighteenth century, all paper was made entirely by hand. The marked rise of output in Britain during the century, predicated upon industrial expansion and population growth was, therefore, achieved not so much by any significant technological innovation, but by the construction of an increasing number of paper mills throughout the country.¹ In Scotland between 1790 and 1823 a doubling in output was achieved by the increase in the number of mills from 29 to 74.²

Although the quality of paper produced in these mills was generally high, output, and particularly productivity, were very low. While of no great import in the early decades of the century, this technological stagnation became more and more a liability to papermakers as the years progressed. The increasing pace of population growth,³ the spread of industrialisation, of urbanism, the expansion of education, together with the advance of publishing and the emergence of a daily press, all combined in the latter quarter of the eighteenth century and on into the nineteenth, to create a very considerable increase in demand for paper products of all kinds.

This pressure served greatly to intensify existing strains on the supply of paper which technological (or technical) limitations to its production had brought about. To ease the

¹ By the end of the eighteenth century, there were 416 mills operating in England and Wales, 49 in Scotland and 60 in Ireland. Education Committee of the Technical Section of the British Paper and Board Maker's Association (1950) p. 16.

² Thomson, A. (1974) p. 176.

³ The population of the U.K. doubled to 29 million between 1800 and 1861. Coleman, D.C. (1958) p. 207.

blockage and meet the rapidly escalating demand for paper, manufacturers devoted a much greater amount of time, money and effort on research into more efficient methods of production.

The first significant breakthrough came in 1799 when a Frenchman, Louis Robert, at the mill of Didot Frères at Essonne, invented a machine capable of making paper continuously, as opposed to the earlier intermittent methods dictated by the hand mould. These were troubled times in France and Robert’s invention was brought to Britain in order to secure the financial backing for its development. It was adopted by the London firm of stationers, Henry and Sealy Fourdrinnier, for whom further modifications and improvements by the young engineer, Bryan Donkin, made the machine a commercial proposition.

Table 3.1 Number of mills at work in the U.K., 1840-1860

Year	England & Wales	Scotland	Ireland	Total
1840	362	48	52	462
1850	328	48	39	415
1860	306	52	26	384

Source: Coleman, D.C. (1958) p. 221.

Although the firm was pushed into bankruptcy in the process, the machine was to revolutionise the paper industry, forming the basis for the rapid rise in output which followed, not only in Britain, but throughout the world, during the nineteenth century. By 1830 one half the paper made in the UK was produced using Donkin’s machine, of which 38 had been sold by 1833, and 191 by 1850⁴ out of 407 paper making machines of all types in operation in Great Britain.⁵ Largely as a result of mechanisation,

⁴ Clapperton, R. H. (1952) p. 3.

⁵ Munsell, J. (1876) p. 115. Scottish paper producers, perhaps as a result of the abundance of water supplies, were quick to realise the potential of the new machines, their contribution to paper production in the U.K. rising from 10.7% in 1824 to 22.2%

British paper production more than quadrupled in the years 1821 to 1857,⁶ despite a sharp fall in the number of paper mills (Table 3.1).

Hills notes that in Britain in 1851 there were 563 newspapers including 17 dailies. By 1867 this had risen to 1294 newspapers of which 84 were dailies.⁷ The daily print run of *The Times* required 7.5 tons of paper in the 1850's as the circulation continued to climb from 2000 copies in 1790 to 65,000 copies in 1861.⁸ At the same time Hills states, *The Illustrated London News* printed, on one occasion, half a million double numbers equivalent to one million sheets, exceeding 70 tons in weight.⁹ The rapid escalation in the number of newspapers and in the volume of sales was matched in other areas of printing. The number of letters posted in the U.K., for example, rose from about 75 million immediately prior to the introduction of the penny post in 1841 to 329 million in 1849.¹⁰

Such a steep rate of increase in paper production during the nineteenth century (Table 3.2), which was matched in the major European countries as well as the U.S.A., could not have been achieved without the introduction of papermaking machines. But productivity was only one of the problems facing the industry in the mid nineteenth century. As demand continued to rise rapidly the availability of raw materials became an increasingly important issue to the trade.

The manufacture of paper had for long relied almost exclusively on cotton and linen rags as the primary raw material input. The shortage of these resources had caused serious problems in the industry even during the eighteenth century, but these were

in 1854. See Thomson, A. (1974) p. 192.

⁶ Thomson (1974) p. 176.

⁷ Hills (1988), p. 119.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Table 3.2 British Paper Output 1830 - 1605

Year	Amount of paper made (lbs)	Year	Amount of paper made (lbs)	Year	Amount of paper made (lbs)
1830	62,882,830	1841	97,105,550	1852	154,469,211
1831	62,024,346	1842	96,693,323	1853	177,633,010
1832	64,935,467	1843	103,449,627	1854	177,896,224
1833	68,418,965	1844	109,495,148	1855	166,776,394
1834	70,605,889	1845	124,247,071	1856	187,716,575
1835	74,042,650	1846	127,442,482	1857	191,721,620
1836	77,692,282	1847	121,965,315	1858	192,847,197
1837	88,950,845	1848	121,820,220	1859	217,827,197
1838	93,466,286	1849	132,132,660	1860	223,575,285
1839	97,646,544	1850	141,032,474		
1840	97,237,358	1851	150,903,543		

Source : BPP (1861) *Report from the Select Committee on Paper (Export Duty on Rags)*, Appendix 3, p. 110.

largely overcome by the rise of textile production, the waste products of which formed the source of much of the rags used in paper-making. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the substantial increases in paper production throughout the world had engendered a major crisis in the industry as papermakers were thrown into a position of greater competition for available rags. Moreover, although textile output continued to rise, the level of waste did not increase proportionately :

"In consequence of improvements in machinery, and the cotton manufacture not being so profitable as it used to be, an immense quantity of the waste is used up in the (textile) mills where the manufacture took place".¹¹

¹¹ Select Committee, p.292. John Evans, partner in the papermaking firm John Dickinson and Company, reported to the Select Committee that "...we have also lost a large quantity of the cotton waste, in consequence of the extension of the railway system, for a good deal of it is now taken to clean the railway engines, and so on. *Ibid.*, p.10.

In Britain The Economist claimed that "so great was the consumption of paper by the reading and writing population of Great Britain, rags could not be procured in sufficient quantity to meet the demand".¹²

Inevitably, in conditions of such scarcity, the price of rags rose sharply. In England, for example, top quality rags which were selling for 26 shillings per hundredweight in 1852, were attracting between 32 and 34 shillings in 1854.¹³ Similar increases were observable for lower quality rags.¹⁴

3.2 Alternative Sources of Raw Material

The increased production and consumption of paper products and the resulting acute problems in obtaining raw materials during the nineteenth century, particularly in the 1850's and 1860's, gave an added urgency to the need for research into new production methods in general, and a greater priority to the search for alternative sources of raw material in particular.¹⁵

Rags were ideal for paper making because they contained up to 90% cellulose, which constituted the main ingredient in paper.¹⁶ Yet it was well known that all plant life was made up of cellulose to varying degrees. Thus it was that a great number of experiments were undertaken all over the world, on a bewildering variety of vegetable matter in the hope of finding a suitable alternative to cotton and linen rags.¹⁷ The

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹³ Munsell, J. (1876) pp. 125, 136.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 136.

¹⁵ *The Times* offered a reward of £1,000 in 1854 to anyone who could discover a viable and readily available substitute to rags in the production of paper. It was never claimed. Evans, J. (1955) p. 109.

¹⁶ Cotton was the purest form of cellulose "requiring practically no preliminary treatment to render it fit for paper-making". Clapperton (1952) p. 6.

¹⁷ *The Times*, August 4, 1871, reported the British Consul-General of Havana, Mr Graham Dunlop's observation that "the papermakers of England should give some attention to the enormous quantities of fibrous tropical plants and trees which abound

banana plant, tree bark, basswood, bracken, thistles, roots of horseradish, peat, bamboo, and the common garden hollyhock were but a few of the materials tried in the search for new paper-making materials many of which, together with new processing methods, formed the basis for a large number of patents taken out by hopeful inventors.¹⁸ Such investigation was by no means limited to Britain. *The Times*, for example, under the headline "New Material for Paper", reported in 1873 that at a recent General Assembly of French Papermakers, MM Jourdeuil, Parizot and Gresse had submitted samples of a new textile fabric, the sheath of the hop stalk which, by removing the outer skin and "submitting it to a certain chemical process, a textile substance possessing the qualities which made rags so valuable in papermaking, namely length, suppleness and delicacy of texture, has been produced".¹⁹

The technical feasibility of producing paper from such plants and trees was never in question. The real issue in seeking a resource which could make a significant impact on the paper trade was finding a resource in sufficient quantity, constant supply and at a competitive cost. Most of the materials tried were of no more than local interest to paper manufacturers, their limited geographical extent and often isolated location made their widespread adoption impossible. Moreover, apart from their often small cellulose content, the cost of bleaching and otherwise preparing the fibre for paper making was prohibitive. The report of the Select Committee set up to investigate the problems of Britain's paper manufacturers in 1861 noted that :

"the committee have directed their equal attentions to inquiry as to the possibilities of applying any new fibre as a substitute for the refuse material now in use for papermaking purposes, and find that great efforts have been made to discover some material of this nature, but as yet without success; and although they see no reason to doubt that straw and other fibrous substances may form a supplementary part of the material for paper-making the great comparative expense of chemically reducing these raw fibres presents difficulties

in Cuba. Successful experiments have been made by local papermakers on the fibre of the bamboo cane and on some of the creeping parasite plants indigenous to Cuba.

¹⁸ See Munsell.

¹⁹ *The Times*, August 30, 1873.

to their becoming a substitute for refuse material now used."²⁰

Of all the materials straw offered the most potential to British papermakers it being readily available in many regions and close at hand. Some manufacturers did begin using straw during the early to mid nineteenth century but really only out of necessity since the quality of paper produced from the material was very inferior to that from rags being hard and brittle offering a poor colour. It was only suitable for low grade packaging and carding materials although it was used to supply the requirements of some newspapers both in Britain, where *The Morning Star* was made of straw paper, and in the United States.²¹ Quite apart from the poor quality of paper made entirely from straw, or even when mixed with rags, supply was not necessarily as easy as might have been thought. John Evans in his report to the Select Committee pointed out that in some counties there were clauses in the leases which compelled the tenants to consume the straw on their own land.²² In his testimony to the Committee William Thomas who was manufacturing paper from straw at his Soho Mills near High Wycombe, replied to a question in which he was asked if straw was in abundant supply:

"No; and if another straw manufacturer were to set up a mill on the same stream where I am I believe it would so enhance the price of straw that we should not be able to work it at a profit at all".²³

Although the price of straw was much cheaper than rags it did tend to fluctuate greatly, "at some times it is 30 shillings a ton and at others £4."²⁴ John Evans stated that he had heard of instances "where the manufacture of paper of straw had been commenced

²⁰ *Report of the Select Committee*, p. 270.

²¹ *Report of the Select Committee*, Submission by Mr Frederick Magnay, p.16. Munsell notes that "The Ledger, a Philadelphia daily paper having a very large circulation, perhaps 20,000 or 30,000 a day, was printed on paper made principally from straw..... It was manufactured by Fienour and Nixon at Manayunk, by what was denominated Melliers process, by which, it was claimed, paper could be made of almost any vegetable fibrous substance", p. 134.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

and then discontinued or been incapable of being extended on account of the dearness of straw, resulting from the demand created".²⁵ In addition the levels of waste in the manufacture of paper from straw was extremely high, one ton of paper requiring anything between three or four tons of straw, while the cost of preparing and bleaching could reach anything between five and six times the cost of similarly treating rags.²⁶

Wood was another source which held out some promise, but the mechanical processes which were developed, despite the improvements made by Keller and Voetter,²⁷ produced a poor quality pulp the use of which was largely limited to brown paper and wrappings. It was not until after 1866, when Tilhman took out his patent for the chemical production of pulp from softwoods, that this material gained ground in the paper industry.²⁸

3.3 Thomas Routledge and Esparto Grass

In Britain by the early 1860's, a promising alternative to rags was already gaining widespread acceptance thanks largely to the perseverance of Thomas Routledge who, though not originally a paper maker, had become interested in the search for new raw materials in the early 1850's. Born in 1819 the son of a wine merchant, Routledge joined a company in South Wales when he left school where he applied his scientific training to the extraction of copper from its ores. While with the firm he met the Marquis of Bessano who was at the time greatly involved in the search for a substitute to rags in the manufacture of paper. Routledge became interested in the subject and

²⁵ Report of the Select Committee, p.10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1859) noted that "...straw...costs only about £2 to £3 a ton; but we believe that the cost of bleaching it will make the amount £16 or £18 in all; and when to this is added the fact that...not one half or even one third of the weight of straw employed is got back in paper, and that the paper is necessarily much more brittle than that from rags there appears no great advantage in using it".

²⁷ Education Committee of the Technical Section of the British Paper and Board Maker's Association, Inc. (1950) p. 18.

²⁸ See, for example, Clapperton (1955) p. 4.

spent a good deal of his time at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew where he began working with esparto, or alfa, grass. Although he himself rapidly became aware of the potential of esparto he quickly realised that the only way to really prove its utility was to make paper on a mill scale and so it was that in 1854 he rented a small mill at Eynesham, near Oxford. His choice of mill was not made at random. Eynesham had been experimenting with other fibres for some time but without any notable success.²⁹

Esparto grass was not new to the paper industry and Routledge never claimed he was the first to introduce the material to papermaking. The first patent for making paper from esparto was probably taken out by Miles Berry in 1839 followed by another in 1853 in the name of Jules Dehau of Paris and one in 1854 by James Murdoch.³⁰ Routledge was, however, undoubtedly the first to take it beyond the experimental stage. In 1856 he brought out his first patent for the extraction of cellulose from the material and in the same year began full scale production of pulp from his mill at Eynesham. He did not find immediate success with his new process, the early products of which were considered a poor substitute for rags.³¹ John Carlisle, of C.E. and J.G. Potter, papermakers in Lancashire, had experimented with esparto in the mid 1850's but the tests were a failure even with the expert help of a French chemist after initial work on their own account proved fruitless.³² Carlisle did not believe esparto would provide papermakers with a viable alternative to rags for papermaking and said as much even

²⁹ See, for example, Watson, G. (1957) The Search for Papermaking Fibres - Thomas Routledge and the Use of Esparto Grass as a Papermaking Fibre, *Papermaker* 26. Reid notes that Routledge had said at a meeting of the Society of Arts in November 1856, that the proceedings of the Royal Agricultural meeting at Oxford in 1852 had been printed on paper made from twitch or squitch grass at the Eynesham mill. Reid, J. (1948), Some Contributions to the History of Esparto, *Proceedings of the Technical Section of the British Paper and Board Makers Association* 29.

³⁰ Evans, Joan (1955) *The Endless Webb, John Dickinson and Co. Ltd. 1804-1954* London: Jonathan Cape, p. 109.

³¹ Carter, Harry. (1967), p. 204 notes that the ledger of Wolvercote mills records a single payment to Routledge in August 1857 the material being found unsuitable.

³² Report of the Select Committee, p. 60.

in 1861 to the Select Committee.³³

In the latter years of the 1850's, though, the acute shortage of rags became critical for British paper manufacturers which to were increasingly forced to resort to the importation of rags from Europe (see Table 3.3). Imports of rags rose by almost 270% from 9414 tons in 1855 to 25,287 tons in 1863.

Table 3.3 British imports of rags, 1855-1868 (in tons)

Year	Tons	Year	Tons	Year	Tons
1855	9,414	1860	16,122	1865	18,264
1856	10,284	1861	19,587	1866	-
1857	12,196	1862	21,966	1867	18,399
1858	11,379	1863	25,287	1868	17,860
1859	14,598	1864	23,732		

Sources: Trade and Navigation of the U.K. with Foreign Countries and British Possessions for the Years 1855 to 1859. British Parliamentary Papers 1860, LXIV; 1861, LX; 1862, LVI; 1863, LXV; 1864, LVII; 1865, LII; 1866, LXVIII; 1867, LXVI; 1868, LXVII.

Although supplies came in small amounts from many countries, the principal sources came from, or via, a number of European countries, notably Russia, Germany, France and Italy. Thus, in 1863, of the 25,287 tons imported, Prussia accounted for 6,643 tons (all linen rags); Hamburg, 3,348 tons (of which 2,233 tons were linen rags, the remainder mainly cotton); the Italian States, 3,141 tons; and France, 2,349 tons. During the late 1850's, however, many European countries, in an effort to protect raw material supplies for their own industries, imposed either heavy duties or, as in the case

³³ Carlisle felt that the paper produced was of a similar quality to that made from straw, being brittle and expensive to reduce and bleach. He was not convinced that esparto could be a total substitute for rags although conceded that it may be of some use as a mixture with rags, in the same way that straw was. Report of the Select Committee, p.60. Likewise experiments done at Hollins Mills, on which £3,000-£4,000 was spent, proved a failure even after the help of a French chemist. See Reid, p.234.

of Belgium and Spain, prohibitions on the exportation of rags. In France, for example, the duty amounted to £4 17s 6d in 1861, in Holland the tariff was £8 8s 4d, while from the Zollverein the export levy was £9 3s.³⁴

British paper manufacturers pointed out that this gave their French and German competitors a competitive advantage over them of £5 and £9 respectively. Indeed, as it took between one and a half tons of rags to produce a ton of paper, the true differential was in the region of £7 and £14 per ton for the finished product.³⁵ *The Times*³⁶ complained that the French export duty in as much as it enhanced the purchase cost of French rags to British mills, was "equivalent to a bounty paid out of his pocket and into that of the French competition".³⁷

What made the situation worse for the British paper trade was that in a trade treaty with France in 1860 the Government proposed to abolish the Customs duty of 2.5d a pound on imports of foreign paper which at 1d a pound above the Excise duty (also to be abolished) paid by British manufacturers on their output had provided a form of protection against imports.³⁸ In October of 1861, all duties on paper were abolished. The result was that the price of British paper fell by some 10% between March 1860 and March 1861 causing "a loss on the working of some mills and for others to go on half time".³⁹ One manufacturer, Mr Benjamin Brown, of Kent, reported to the Select Committee that the regulation of duties had "reduced my profit so low that at the present moment I am unable to tell whether I have any profit at all; and I am carrying on my mills in the hope that some relief may arise from this investigation and that the

³⁴ BPP (1861) LVIII, "Return of the names of those countries in Europe which permit and prohibit the free export of rags, or impose a duty".

³⁵ *The Times*, Wednesday, June 15, 1864 "The Paper Trade".

³⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

³⁷ *The Times*, Saturday, January 30, 1864, p. 6.

³⁸ Ironically, British paper makers had been calling for the abolition of the 1.5d excise duty for many years, seeing it as a "tax on knowledge". Evans (1955) p. 103.

³⁹ BPP (1861) XI, Report from the Select Committee, p. 231.

Government may see the necessity of obtaining either free trade on rags, or reimpose the 1d per pound import duty from those countries who refuse our equitable demand".⁴⁰

3.4 Esparto Introduced to British Paper Making

Although many of the claims from manufacturers were undoubtedly exaggerated (the number of licences granted for the production of paper actually increased in 1861) the measures forced many to take more seriously the possibilities of using different raw materials. And it was to esparto and to Thomas Routledge that many turned. Routledge himself had not been idle in the intervening years and had spent a great deal of time and money in refining his process to be commercially viable. In 1860 and again in 1861 he brought out new patents which greatly improved the quality of paper produced.⁴¹(see Appendix 1)

At the International Exhibition of 1862 Routledge was awarded a medal for his esparto paper the citation of which reads:

"Numerous patents have, as might be expected, been taken out for the treatment of this plant. Those by Mr Routledge would appear from the increasing employment of this material, to be the most useful, effectual and economical. Judging from the specimens of paper exhibited from Mr Routledge, and manufactured by him at his mills at Eynsham, near Oxford, exclusively from esparto, as well as from the other specimens of paper manufactured at various other mills employing his process, in which esparto is used as a blend ordinary rag material, the results are very satisfactory, demonstrating that a new material has at length been brought into use, meeting this long desired requirement both as regards quality and economy".⁴²

In fact paper made from esparto was to become renowned for its quality being on a par to, and for certain important uses, better than that produced from other materials

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 348.

⁴¹ His earlier patent involved the use of an alkaline solvent containing more lime than was necessary to make it caustic and the washing of the fibres in a bicarbonate solution, while in that of 1861 he used a solution containing only enough lime to make it caustic. See Carter (1967) p. 203.

⁴² *The British and Colonial Printer and Stationer*, August 15, 1895, p. 10.

including rags.

"Esparto papers are distinguished by their refined, silky texture and bulk and close uniform surface or finish. This latter quality, after this bulkiness, is their most outstanding characteristic and makes them eminently suitable for fine printings and other papers required to take a fine impression from plates. The best body paper for surface coating are mostly made from esparto because it is so light, body paper of about 50% esparto being preferred. The fibres are very absorbent, taking and retaining a high proportion of resin size and may be made into quite a hard and "tinny" paper. Esparto papers are easily watermarked very regular in expansion and contraction, and unsurpassed for offset paper. The fibres readily absorb colours and brilliant tints may be produced".⁴³

Routledge decided that instead of the traditional route of charging users a royalty for his invention, he would make his secret freely available but on the condition that those who wished to adopt his process buy their semi-processed material (or pulp) :

"I speedily found that the papermakers largely looked to my secret as calculated to ameliorate the then depressed conditions of the [paper making] trade. In 1860, and subsequently, 88 parties, all large papermakers, signed agreements [with Routledge]. The first agreement was signed by Mr Rawlings in 1860".⁴⁴

Routledge defined the conditions which a new material should fulfil :

- (1) It must yield a paper of good quality at low cost and with uniform success.
- (2) The supply must be constant and unvarying at low price, not liable to fluctuate.⁴⁵

These conditions he claimed were:

"met by esparto and contracts have been arranged at prices not much above the cost of hay in this country or the cost of freight and charges alone of any fibre imported from the colonies or the East Indies. Supply is guaranteed from 500 up to 3000 tons per annum and can be increased. The cost of half stuff is £10 - £16 for partly bleached, £16 - £26 for wholly bleached. compared with rag half-stuff at £26 -£35 per ton."⁴⁶

Partly because of effluent problems but also to increase the potential production of

⁴³ Labarre, E. J. (1952) pp. 91-92.

⁴⁴ *The British Colonial Printer and Stationer*, no 824, vol XXXVII, June 11, 1896, "Esparto and Its History, part V.

⁴⁵ Reid (1948) *op. cit.*, p. 233.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 233. Prior to 1861, the excise duty applied only to paper, not to half-stuff, and this is one reason why Routledge planned to sell half-stuff to the paper trade. See Watson (1957) *op cit.*, p. 4.

esparto half stuff (pulp) Routledge purchased, together with John Evans of Dickinson & Co., the Ford Mill at South Hylton near Sunderland around 1860, the new company having Routledge as manager and Evans as chairman.⁴⁷ Although production continued at the Ford Mills until it burnt down in 1887, Routledge, in 1866, joined forces with George Noble in the Esparto Trading Company, in which Noble was to act as a general broker between the esparto supply from Spain and the trade in general.⁴⁸ The company was wound up in 1876 having failed to submit returns in accordance with the Companies Act (1862) for the year 1875.⁴⁹

The production of paper made from esparto became a speciality of mills in northern England, and particularly in Scotland, where many of the pioneer consumers of the grass were based. This was partly because of the abundance of fresh water, coal fields were close at hand (esparto provided coals ships journeying to the Mediterranean with ballast for the return leg) and because carbonate of soda and bleaching powder had been produced by Charles Tennant at the St Rollox works since the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁵⁰

But in general British Paper producers quickly took to esparto enthusiastically on

⁴⁷ Reid, J. (1948) p. 232. It is interesting to note that Evans, whose firm had been experimenting with esparto for some time at their mill in Hertfordshire, had to cease production of half-stuff there because of problems with the effluent created in producing esparto pulp. See Evans, J. (1955) *op. cit.*, p. 110.

⁴⁸ Reid notes that G.R. Noble was a pupil at Ford Mills during Routledge's time and stayed at his home, p.235

⁴⁹ Routledge himself helped found the Esparto Trading Company in 1866 (Board of Trade 31/1288/3245) along with George Noble and William Hope amongst others. Both Noble and Hope, the latter in partnership with Daniel McNaughton and trading under the name McLean and Hope, were to assume a tremendous influence in the trade in the succeeding years (see below). The company was wound up in 1876 because it failed to submit returns in accordance with the Companies Act (1862) for the year 1875. See Walton, J. (1985), p. 954.

⁵⁰ Reid, J., *op. cit.*, p.235.

quality as well as cost grounds.⁵¹ it even became extensively used in the manufacture of newsprint. *The Times*, *The Daily Chronicle*, *The Illustrated London News*, *The Graphic*, and *The Sphere* were just some of those which converted to esparto paper.⁵²

Table 3.4 British Imports of Alfa Grass in Tons and By Value (1870-1881)

Year	Quantity (tons)	Value (£)	Ratio (£/ton)
1870	103,161	-	-
1871	114,400	1,239,811	8.58
1872	104,621	803,396	7.68
1873	102,649	843,672	8.23
1874	119,176	972,385	8.16
1875	141,900	1,113,285	7.85
1876	130,891	1,046,649	7.99
1877	175,878	1,286,237	7.31
1878	140,505	932,300	6.64
1879	161,971	1,055,616	6.52
1880	191,229	1,372,573	7.80
1881	102,493	1,286,211	6.68

Source: British Parliamentary Papers (1871) LXIII; (1872) LVI; (1873) LXIII; (1874) LXIV; (1875) LXIII; (1876) LXII; (1877) LXXX; (1878) LXXi; (1878-79) LXVIII; (1880) LXXI; (1881) LXXXVII; (1882) LXVIII.

Imports of the grass to Britain rose dramatically during the 1860's (Table 3.4). From 878 tons in 1862, they increased sharply to 19,329 tons in 1863, whereafter imports

⁵¹ In 1856 a ton of esparto sold at £4 while the price of cotton was £8. See *The British and Colonial Printer and Stationer*, August 15, 1895, p. 10 and BPP (1861) XI, Report from the Select Committee, p. 293.

⁵² One newspaper owner, Mr Edward Lloyd, whose titles included *Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper*, and later *The Daily Chronicle*, imported his own grass directly to his mills on the Medway from Algeria where by 1871 he was reputed to own 180,000 acres of land for the sole supply of his publications. See Walton, J. (1985).

continued to climb at a remarkable rate. In 1864, imports were almost double the previous year's level at 43,403 tons, reaching 52,324 tons in 1865, and 69,468 tons in 1866 and after dipping slightly to 55,073 tons in 1867 reached 95 828 tons the following year.

As a corollary to this, and despite the continued expansion of paper production in the U.K., imports of rags declined (Table 3.2). From 25,287 tons in 1863, they fell to 23,732 tons in 1864, 18,264 tons in 1865, 18,399 tons in 1867, and only 17,860 tons in 1868.

3.5 Spanish Grasses

All but a tiny fraction of this consumption of esparto was met by Spanish grasses which flourished in the coastal region around Barcelona, Malaga, Sevilla and Aguilas. Because the grass held little or no economic value for any other agricultural activity, British companies, including The Esparto Trading Company, had little difficulty in obtaining from the Spanish Government the rights to the exploitation of the grass growing over large areas of the country. These concessions were given on payment of an annual rent plus an additional sum for each ton exported. British firms and merchants flocked to the region encouraged by the prospects for profit which the rapidly increasing level of demand promised.

Within a few years, however, the scale of demand together with imprudent methods of collection and continued political unrest in Spain had created severe problems of supply. As early as 1865 the Tullis Russell firm of paper manufacturers warned that they had heard "of some merchants closing their accounts with Spain on account of its unsettled political state. Let this be kept in mind".⁵³ Four years later the firm's esparto supplier in Aberdeen wrote complaining:

"You have no idea of the great loss I have sustained by short weight and bad quality...It is difficult to get justice from these Spanish merchants...I have had so much trouble and difficulty in connection with esparto this year".⁵⁴

⁵³ Ketelby, C.D.M. (1967) p. 111.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

As supplies became a problem prices rose sharply by £3, to £10 a ton between March 1869 and September 1870.⁵⁵ The market report of Lynn and Co. in March 1870 noted that:

"Owing to the continued scarcity of this fibre the market maintains the firm character reported in the last circular and prices still ride high....Our most recent advices from Spain...announce an advance of at least 10s per ton on the extreme rates already paid and the market is so sensitive that the appearance of an additional buyer upon the spot is a sufficient cause for an immediate rise in prices".⁵⁶

3.6 North African Grasses

Routledge, himself, came to the opinion that the supply from Spain was becoming so difficult that it would soon become unviable to purchase from there, largely on the grounds of imprudent collection methods. He estimated that it took at least fifteen years to reproduce esparto from seed and that it was certain to become exhausted in Spain. During the 1870's, while not abandoning esparto (he continued, on his own account and in collaboration with others, to apply for patents to improve the treatment of esparto even until the 1880's) Routledge turned his attention to other vegetable matter, principally bamboo, which he, erroneously, with hindsight, believed would take over from esparto as an important material in the manufacture of paper.⁵⁷

Demand for esparto continued to rise in succeeding decades with imports climbing to 103,161 tons in 1870 and 144,441 tons in 1871. To meet the demand merchants increasingly turned their attentions to alternative sources of supply which were found along the southern shores of the Mediterranean in the north African countries of Algeria, Tunis, Tripolitania and, to a lesser extent, Morocco. Routledge never claimed any rights over north African grasses since he was confident of supplies from Spain, and apprehensive of developing contacts with north African countries. The grass, however, grew abundantly in the higher plateaux of north Africa from Morocco in the west and into the vast alfa fields of Algeria and further to Tunis and Tripolitania in the

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁵⁶ *The Times*, March 31, 1870 p. 9.

⁵⁷ Reid, J., *op. cit.*, p 235.

east.

But Morocco, Tunis, and Tripolitania in these early years held few attractions for British traders, for whom they remained "the Barbary States", controlled by governments hostile to Europe and Christianity. Algeria, however, as the only north African country where Europe had asserted her dominance, was somewhat different. Algiers had been annexed by France in 1830 since when it had been governed through a French staffed administration directly from Paris. One of France's principal aims in Algiers was to encourage as far as possible, the exploitation of the country's resources by French nationals, or "colons".

But with regard to the alfa trade, other considerations came to the fore. From 1830, France had been struggling desperately to subjugate the whole of the country, particularly the remoter areas traditionally less inclined to pay much attention to central authority even before French annexation. It was in these areas, though, that much of the alfa grew. For France, its collection provided unique opportunities to help pacify the turbulent tribes of these regions by encouraging links with European trade.

To the French, this land was of no economic value, and anything which promoted order and European influence among the tribes was to be encouraged. If substantial profits could be extracted from such otherwise worthless land, then so much the better. If it was not to be Frenchmen who would take the land in this trade, then at the least, growing as alfa grass did in the poorest soil of the country, its collection would not deprive Frenchmen of valuable cultivable acreage.

The French administration did everything in its power to aid the development of the trade in terms at least as favourable as those experienced in Spain. The French ceded the rights of exploitation of alfa growing in arch, or tribal land, to foreign companies.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ In 1873, for example, a total of over 300,000 hectares of tribal land in the high Plateau of the Department of Oran were concede to a M Debrousse, who formed the Compagnie Franco Algerienne, a concession subsequently extended to 700,000

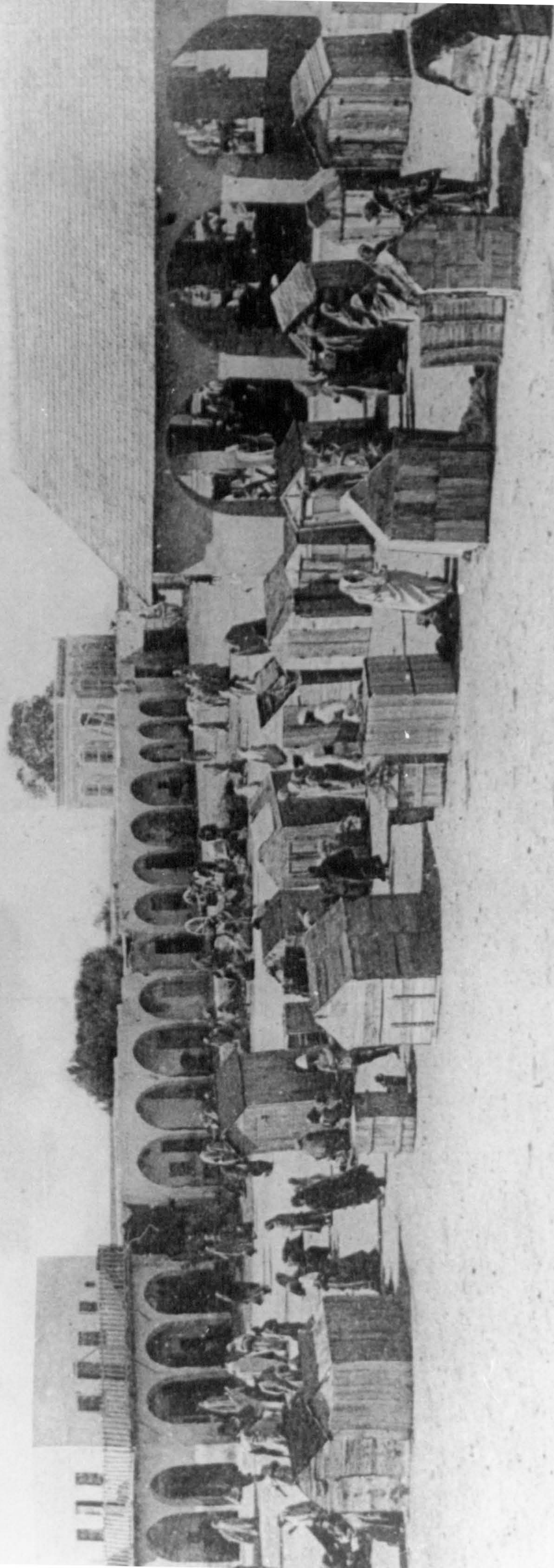
For many years most of the Algerian tribes inhabiting the esparto districts would have little or nothing to do with the trade. They considered the employment nothing more than menial labour. Furthermore, intense dislike and distrust of French and other European parties made the tribes largely antipathetical, if not hostile to the companies' operations on land which they had always regarded as theirs since time immemorial. Thus, for many years, the collection and preparatory work on alfa before shipment was done by migrant Spanish labour, generally from the esparto districts of Spain, and therefore already skilled in the methods of collection.

3.7 Conclusion

The severe shortage of raw materials for the production of paper and paper products, mainly caused by increased demand consequent on increasing industrialisation, urbanisation, the expansion of education, had created the conditions by the mid nineteenth century in which innovation was both required and flourished. The repeal of the advertising tax in 1853, the abolition of the stamp duty in 1855 and of the paper and excise taxes in 1861, encouraged the increased demand for paper. Such increasing demand outpaced the availability of raw materials producing increased costs at a time of reduced selling prices. Thomas Routledge is owed a great deal for his pioneering work in persevering with his experiments and refinement of the process of converting esparto grass into a cost effective, and high quality alternative to rags in the manufacture of paper. Such an unlikely resource was to become a staple of the British paper industry for the following 100 years despite the introduction of wood pulp to the industry.

hectares.

23. - BEN-GARDANE. - Vue générale du Souk



Chapter Four

The Beginnings of the Alfa Trade in Tunisia

4.1 Introduction

With demand for esparto from the British paper industry increasing rapidly during the late 1860's and encouraged by the ease with which Algerian grasses were being exploited, British commodity brokers began to seek new opportunities in the material further afield. As the known esparto resources in north Africa stretched to the far east of Algeria, the obvious place to start was in Tunisia. Thus it was that in 1871 the British firm of McLean and Hope, which claimed to be the world's largest shipper of alfa grass, wrote to the British Consul in Tunis, Richard Wood, enquiring as to the geographical extent of the grass in the country and to the possibilities of its profitable exploitation on a large scale.

Wood, knowing nothing of the material himself, but ever eager to promote British interests in the country, immediately contacted his consular agents along the southern coast urging each of them to submit their assessments of the grass in their respective districts. Even McLean and Hope were quite taken aback by Wood's reply which they found :

"... astonishing and quite overreach our highest estimate as we could not hear of more than 25 ships for that trade (9,000 - 10,000 tons)".¹

Wood was himself delighted with the possibilities of an important new branch of British commerce in Tunis. Enthusing at length about the resource he wrote in a letter to Lord Granville at the Foreign Office that :

"... notwithstanding the very small quantity [of esparto grass] which was brought to the market, Esparto grass exists in unlimited quantities in the Regency."²

But the mere existence of esparto grass in Tunisia was no guarantee of its successful

¹ FO 335/133/3 McLean & Hope to Wood, July 11, 1871

² FO 335/127/2 Tunis, September 18, 1872.

exploitation as a raw material for Britain's paper industry. Esparto grass, which was indigenous to north Africa, had, for centuries, played an extremely important economic and ecological role in the regions where it grew. In Tunisia these were regions populated by semi-nomadic and nomadic tribes living a subsistence way of life based on animal husbandry. These regions and their inhabitants were only marginally linked to the increasingly market orientated economy of the settled populations of the coastal belt. Travel amongst the tribes of the interior was dangerous and contacts few. Politically, as was discussed in Chapter Two, the tribes enjoyed a high degree of autonomy from the central government in Tunis.

Of course similar problems faced the merchants in neighbouring Algeria when attempts were first made to develop a trade in esparto and these were rapidly overcome. But the Tunis of 1870 was an altogether different proposition to Algeria at the same period. In Algeria the French staffed Administration went to great lengths to facilitate ease of access to the country's esparto resources, offering very cheap concessions to the rights to esparto on common ("arch" or (tribal)) land to foreign businessmen and a number of other inducements to promote the exploitation of a resource which would, otherwise, have provided little value to the country. French interests in Algeria were as much motivated by political as economic reasons, the grass growing in tribal regions where French political control was still weak even after 35 years of formal Metropolitan control. Bringing the distant tribes more fully into the broader economy and increasing their dependence on external business interests was seen as a useful means of extending French political authority in these regions.

In Tunis, by contrast, the Beylical government had neither the means nor the will to attempt to offer similar conditions to merchants and businessmen. The Bey, beleaguered by financial crises and beset by constant and increasing foreign encroachment on his sovereignty, was unable even to guarantee merchants' safe passage into the interior. The possibility of his offering the rights to exploit esparto on tribal land was remote in the extreme and attempts to do so would have been political suicide. Conditions for the development of any large-scale trade in esparto grass in Tunis gave few grounds for optimism.

4.2 Terminology - Esparto and Sparte

It may be worthwhile, at the outset, to clarify the terminology used in the esparto trade. The term esparto reflects the trade's Spanish origins (indeed for many years, even after the introduction of north African grasses, the material was often referred by British papermakers as Spanish grass). Confusion arises in north Africa where esparto grass, or more properly *stipa tenacissima*, is often mistaken for a similar plant, *lygeum spartum*. This latter was termed sparte by the French but which the Arabs of north Africa called halfa maboula or sennagh. Halfa maboula, which the Spanish knew as albardine, has slightly different qualities to esparto known to the Arabs as halfa roussiya or guedim.³ To the uninitiated the difference between the two may not be immediately apparent although it should be possible, particularly during the season of growth in early spring and summer, to distinguish between the yellow-green hue of true alfa (esparto), from the blue-green colourings of *lygeum sparte* (sparte). On closer inspection the dissimilarities become more obvious the latter being characterised by smaller, stiffer leaves and generally growing to a height up to 40 cm, while the former has longer, finer, leaves often growing to 70 cm or more.

Geographically the two plants enjoy quite different habitats and, although both could be used in the manufacture of paper, this was always the exclusive reserve of esparto. Throughout this work the terms esparto and alfa are used interchangeably to denote the material which was used in the manufacture of paper.

4.3 Sparte (*Lygeum Spartum*)

Much less hardy than alfa grass, sparte is less widespread in Tunisia and although found in relatively limited amounts in many parts of the country it is more at home at low elevations near the coast where the higher humidity and damper soils suit it best. In Tunisia it was, and is today, most commonly found in the south in the immediate

³ See, for example, De Kerambiec (1909), also, Fleury, V. (1900). In fact the terminology in north Africa is somewhat more varied than this. Monchicourt comments that in the High Steppe alfa is called, by the Arabs, halfa and sparte sennah while in the low steppe alfa is called guedin or halfa roussiya, sparte, in these regions, being referred to as halfa maboulah or just halfa. Monchicourt, C. (1906) p. 39. Fleury, *op. cit.*, p. 54, points out that in the south the berber name, el ari, was also widely used.

hinterlands of Sfax, Gabes and Zarzis.

While never used in the manufacture of paper (at least not in Britain) sparte was, and had been for centuries, extensively used in the small (korbou), the special baskets used for holding the pulp of crushed olives during the pressing process (chamis), and a whole range of mats. Other items commonly made from sparte were sandals comprising a simple sole fastened to the foot by two or three thongs which were pressed between the toes, passed around the foot and fastened in front. Rope and cording was also widely made from sparte but there were literally hundreds of objects made from the material its use limited only by the imagination.

Again alfa and sparte could be used interchangeably for such items although sparte was preferred because it was easier to work than alfa. Many tribesmen used alfa grass where sparte was unavailable to make these goods for their own consumption or for barter but some people specialized in the production and commercialization of goods from sparte, the people of the Kerkennah Islands off the coast at Sfax being particularly renowned for their skills in this regard, often travelling as far as Tripolitania for supplies of the material. Their production was not only directed towards local requirements, and a good proportion of their output was destined for markets throughout the Mediterranean basin. Indeed, when Wood made reference to the "very small quantity" of alfa having been brought to market he may have been referring to sparte in its raw state or already worked which was commonly purchased by Sicilian merchants for export to Trapani, Genoa and other towns on the Italian coast where it was used to make nets for the tuna fishing industry.

4.4 Esparto (or Alfa) Grass

Alfa grass (*stipa tenacissima*) is a rushlike plant indigenous to Spain and north Africa although also found elsewhere in the Mediterranean basin.⁴ The parent stock, or base of the plant which appears like a stiff wiry clump is perennial and the leaves, which can

⁴ Much more commonly found elsewhere in the Mediterranean are *lygeum spartum* and diss, a similar plant.

grow from anything between 15 and 140cm, are of annual growth. The leaves grow from the stem which, to reduce moisture loss, curls round itself to form a thin, curved tube. The junction of the annual growths with the stem is called the "atochon".⁵ The atochon first appears in December or January continuing to grow until the spring when the ear appears. The flowering occurs in April or May, the ripening in May or June. When ripe the leaves may be pulled from the root which remains in the ground to grow again the following year.

The germination of the seed takes place in the autumn. When growing from seed the growth process is extremely slow and it can take up to fifteen years for the plant to reach maturity. Propagation is usually achieved by creeping underground stems which grow outwards from the parent plant and creates another clump close by which itself then spreads outwards and so on. The plant, therefore, is very capable of reproducing itself without the need for germination as long as it is not over-harvested. Over-harvesting in Spain and the length of time re-generation from seed would take was the principal reason why Routledge moved away from esparto in the 1870's, devoting more time to experiments with other plants, principally the bamboo. But, if treated well, the plant benefits from prudent harvesting which improves the quality of the leaves for papermaking.

4.5 The Geographical Extent of Alfa Grass in Tunis

Much hardier than sparte, alfa is supremely well suited to the difficult environmental conditions which prevail over much of north Africa. Requiring little water and resistant to wide variations in temperature, the plant grows best on thin, siliceous or limestone soils. Moisture tends to inhibit its growth and its preferred location is at higher elevations inland in areas of low humidity and where annual rainfall is between 400mm and 100mm. Thus, although found in some parts of the Tell, it is much more widespread south of the Dorsale mountain range which separates the more Mediterranean climate of northern Tunisia from the desert and semi-desert south (Figure 4.1).

⁵ Anon., *The British and Colonial Printers and Stationers* 1895, p.10.

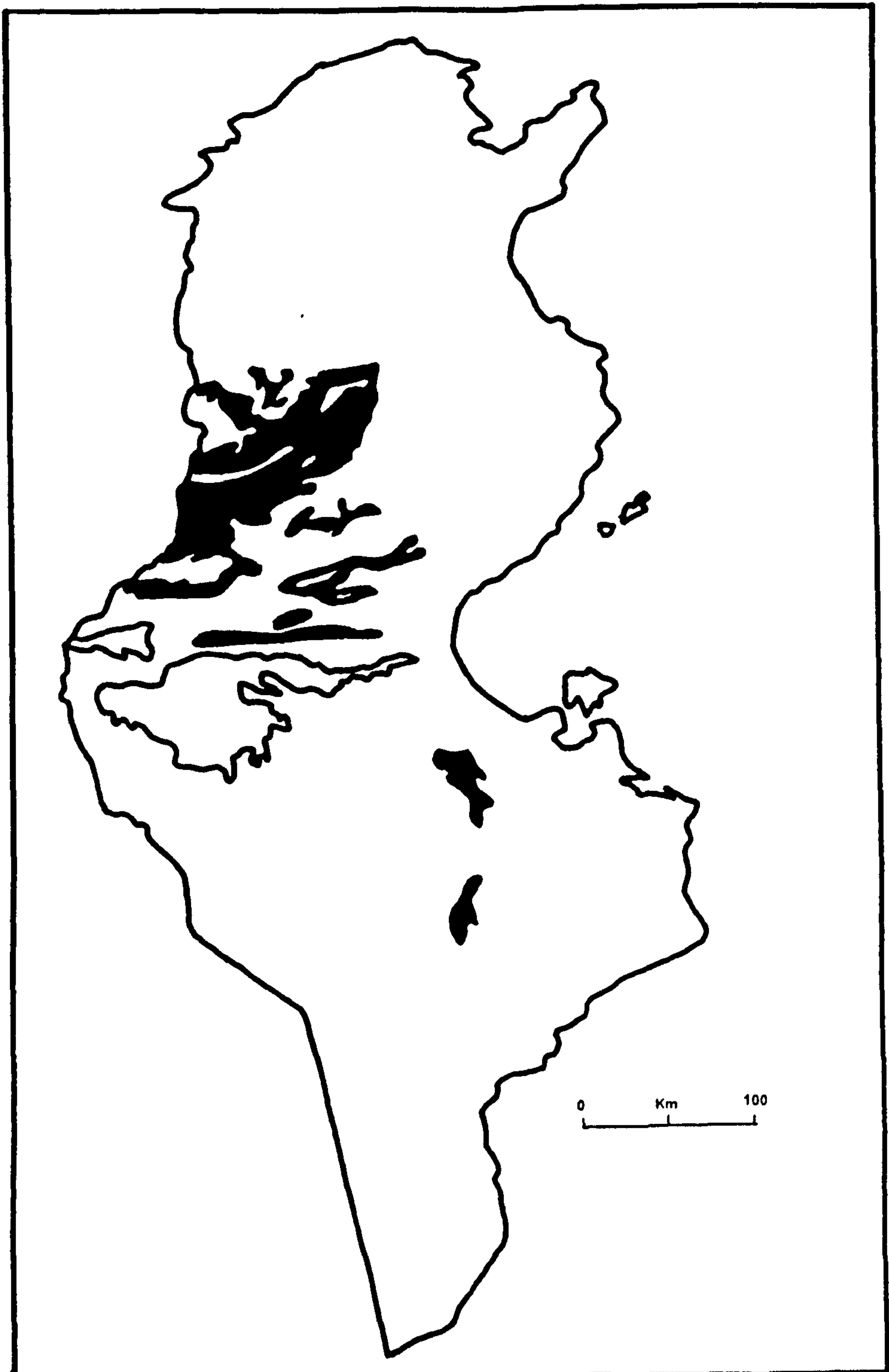


Figure 4.1 Alfa steppe. Source: Mensching, H. (Ed.)(1985) *Afrika - Kartenwerk*, Serie N: Nordafrika Berlin: Gebrüder Borntraeger

Alfa grass is, par excellence, the vegetation of the steppe where it predominates over large areas almost to the exclusion of all other plant life. The largest expanses of alfa are to be found in the high steppe around the towns of Kasserine, Feriana and especially Sbeitla about 150km from the coast. A continuation of the alfa growing in the Departement of Constantine in eastern Algeria the grasses of the Tunisian High Steppe are tall and luxuriant more so than that found elsewhere in Tunisia and indeed most of north Africa. At around 800m above sea level, with low humidity and rainfall averaging below 400mm per annum the grass, here, is in its element :

"....dans les environs de Sbeitla surtout, les touffes serrees les unes contre les autres couvrent toute la surface du sol sur les montagnes qui sont boisees et dans quelques rares enclaves sans grande etendue qui sont les terres de labour des indigenes de la region. L'alfa est la dans sa veritable station, a 800 ou 900 metres au dessus du niveau de la mer, et y donne les plus beaux produits"⁶

As Monchicourt observed so thick does it grow in this region that travel through the wiry clumps can be difficult and slow.⁷

Further east in the low steppe to the south and south east of Kairouan and particularly around the sebka Sidi el Hani and Hadjeb el Aouin considerable quantities of alfa grow over huge expanses of land. Larger amounts, however, are found further south along the chain of mountains stretching from Gafsa to a point some way inland from Skira and as far north as the immediate hinterland of Sfax. In this area alfa grass was especially prevalent on the mountains such as Djebel Aiacha, Djebel Majoura, Djebel el Hafay, Djebel Mezzouna, Djebel Maknassi (Sened), Djebel Ayacha and Djebel Bou Hedma further east.

Moving progressively southward towards the desert, alfa grass becomes increasingly less evident and tends to be restricted more to the higher lands. It is found, albeit in limited amounts, in the sparsely populated lands along the mountains on the northern edge of the Chott el Fedj and Chott Djerid and also in the mountains of the Matmata

⁶ Fleury, V. (1900) p. 58.

⁷ Monchicourt, C. (1908) p. 39.

in the far south. Although of more retrained extent even in the Matmata mountains, alfa grass is a significant resource in that region and is but the western extremity of the extremely large alfa fields of Tripolitania.

Alfa grass thrives under climatic and environmental extremes in which few other plants are able to survive and as such, tends to grow almost to the exclusion of almost all other vegetation. In these regions it is a plant of great ecological importance. The clumps of grass help bind the soil together ameliorating the worst effects of wind and water erosion which periodically afflict these regions of Tunisia, particularly in summer and autumn when the threat of the hot dry mistral winds and of flash floods are at their greatest. In addition the plant provides much needed shade in lands largely devoid of cover, under which a variety of small grasses are able to grow which form the principal fodder for the livestock of the semi-nomadic tribes people. The dead leaves of the alfa plant also provides a humus which nourishes the thin soils such that other grasses are able to grow. A common practice of the tribes was to burn the alfa grass in late spring to allow their animals easier access to the young shoots of grass growing in the shade of the alfa plant. Alfa grass itself, although seldom sought by animals through choice, also offers a source of food of last resort for many animals deprived of alternatives during severe drought.⁸ Although sheep would never eat it under any circumstances the camel, goat and horse would turn to it *in extremis*.

4.6 Initial Scepticism of the Development of a Trade in Alfa Grass

Despite the awareness as early as 1870 of the geographical extent of alfa grass in Tunisia there was also a widespread appreciation that its exploitation on an economic scale was not going to be easy. The areas where the grass grew were inhabited, largely, by nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes. As discussed in Chapter Two, these tribes continued to enjoy, even in the 1870's, a high degree of political autonomy from the Beylical government. Although the Bey's representation amongst these tribes had increased with the expansion of the Caidal structure of governors, particularly during

⁸ The horse would only ever eat the roots of the alfa plant, while the camel, goat and ox would eat, the only usually as a last resort, the young spring shoots. Fleury, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

the nineteenth century, this was designed more as a means of improving the efficiency of tax collection from these tribes and of formalizing thereby their allegiance to his government, than it was an attempt to increase the power of his authority to govern them directly.

The position of Caid was usually purchased by wealthy individuals who viewed it as a commercial proposition based, mainly, on the income generated from tax collections. They seldom lived amongst the tribes they governed. The tribes themselves were largely hostile to the notion of the authority of the central government and despised the Caids as being both foreign to their tribe and as agents of the state as well as for the widespread abuses of power which the Caids were responsible for.

Lacking any real and effective authority over the tribes of south and central Tunisia, the Beylical government was not in a position to offer similar preferential conditions to merchants wishing to develop a trade in alfa grass in the country which were made available in Spain and Algeria. In Algeria, the French administration offered merchants cheap concessions to the exploitation rights of alfa growing over large areas of tribal land. This was not a feasible proposition for the Beylical government in Tunis. Since to the tribes, the rights to the land they inhabited was God-given and inalienable, it was not for the secular authority of the Bey to offer it or rights to its natural resources to anyone else. For the Bey to have attempted it would have been would have been political suicide. Without the military means of enforcing it could only have alienated a large section of the tribal population and would have resulted in immediate uprising amongst tribes who retained a significant degree of military power. At a time when the Beylical government was in severe financial difficulties and faced with the very real threat of political annexation by one of the foreign powers, the possibility of a widespread revolt by the tribes was inconceivable.

In Tunis and Tripolitania (apart from a brief and singularly unhappy period in Tunis between 1881 and 1887, see below) there could be none of the huge concessions of alfa lands which characterized the trade in Spain and Algeria. In the former the development of a trade in alfa grass would depend on merchants' ability to persuade

the tribes to collect the grass in sufficient quantities to be economically viable. This was a daunting prospect for many contemporary observers. Commercial activities in the Regence were heavily concentrated in the agriculturally more favoured north of the country and in the towns along the southern coast such as Mahdia, Sousse, Sfax and to a lesser extent Gabes and Djerba. Although direct economic ties between any of these towns with the tribes of the south and central interior did exist they were irregular and very restrained. Overwhelmingly subsistence oriented, these tribes had little desire or need to trade with the settled populations of the coast. For the merchants and townspeople of the coast the tribes were seen as hostile. Travel through these lands was considered dangerous and few native townspeople, let alone European 'infidels', would even contemplate a journey into the interior without a heavily armed escort for fear of attack from the tribes. Personal safety even with explicit local government or beylical authorization could never be guaranteed. This was not merely a perception but based on experience. There was a large number of caravans from Sousse but particularly Sfax and to a lesser extent, Gabes, which periodically traversed the country carrying indigenous products and European manufactured goods and colonial produce for sale in the towns of the interior of Tunis such as Gafsa, Tozeur and Nefta, as well as for towns more distant markets in Tripolitania and Algeria. These were by no means immune from attack and were constantly harried by tribesmen throughout their journey. Despite armed escort even the best defended of these met, occasionally, with mishap or disaster.⁹ The numerical diminution of these caravans from the 1850's is a mark of the scale of the security problem in the south of the country. Most of the trade which did exist between the tribes and townspeople did so within the protective cordon of the city walls.

Although the potential was widely recognized there was a great deal of scepticism

⁹ There are numerous examples of these in the archives. One such caravan, returning to Sfax from Tebessa in Algeria in 1873 with 40,500 francs in gold received from sales in the market in the Algerian town, was attacked while travelling through lands belonging to the Hammama tribes, its drivers mercilessly murdered and money and animals stolen. The caravan had been organised and backed by a number of Maltese merchants in Sfax. Aix en Provence, 25 H 18, Le General de Division a M le Gouverneur General, Constantine, January 29, 1873.

concerning the feasibility, at least in the short term, of a large scale trade in alfa grass in Tunisia. Edward Carleton the British consular agent at Sfax was not alone in his feelings when he wrote, in early 1871, that :

"...it would be possible to reach 150,000-200,000 cantars [about 10,000 imperial tons] but without speculation and development in the hinterland and no transport (camels or carts), it would be too expensive as one would first have to pay a man two copper piastres for a days work. In order to reach the desired quantity I believe that we must first send a man into the hinterland, a reliable person, but we must have the support of the local government which would guarantee the safety of body and possessions".¹⁰

4.7 Perry Bury Company First to Trade in Alfa

Apparently unbeknown to British consular officials, the Liverpool firm of Perry Bury, which had for many years been trading in north Africa mainly in the export of olives and olive oils, was already, at the time of Mclean and Hope's request of Richard Wood, in the process of pioneering the collection and exportation of alfa grass in both Tunisia and Tripolitania. In Tunisia Perry Bury's business was based in Sousse and Sfax, two of the most important olive growing areas and the principal commercial centres in the south of the country. They were also, in 1871, the ports closest to the alfa districts which already had customs posts and from which, therefore, exports were permitted by the government.

Sousse was the port nearest the alfa growing in the high steppe on the lands occupied by the Fraichiche and Madger tribes while Sfax was nearer the alfa districts in the south central low steppe and the far south.

The company operated initially by entering into contracts with individual merchants whose job it was to arrange for the collection and delivery to the coast, of enough grass to fulfil the pre-arranged contracts with produce brokers in Britain. Most agreements were made with Italian and Maltese merchants of long standing and already involved in small scale import/export activities in the country. Although these merchants were

¹⁰ FO 335/125/1 Carleton to Wood, Sfax, January 14, 1871. Response to Wood's initial request for information to provide Mclean and Hope.

well versed in trade and trading practices amongst the coastal populations, as Europeans their links with the interior tribal peoples beyond the immediate sedentarized coastal areas was very limited. Thus these individual merchants in turn engaged, as and when required, a number of native Arab and especially Jewish brokers, often on a profit sharing basis which was common to the region at that time. These brokers would deal directly with tribal units, negotiating terms for the collection of alfa grass and for its transportation to the coast. Sometimes the grass would be collected at a pre-arranged point in the hinterland and the brokers would organize transport to the ports of Sousse and Sfax, but more common was to include the transportation in the agreement with the tribes.

Perry Bury met with almost immediate success in their early dealings in alfa grass indeed so successful were these initial contacts with some of the most feared tribes in the country that even the most outspoken sceptics of the trade were forced to admit that their worst fears were unjustified. Hence Carleton's more optimistic letter written only three months after his cautious response to Wood's original circular :

"The crop is extremely good and it is said that up to 60,000 cantars have already been gathered and that much more is expected from Gabes and other localities in the region so that I no longer feel that it is necessary to have local government support or a roads insurance."¹¹

Such was the scale of the trade that even at Sousse and Sfax which were, in the context of the Tunis of the day, important centres of trade, the problems of storage of the material quickly became acute. No adequate storage facilities existed which could cope with the quantities of grass which began arriving in these ports from the interior and a variety of transshipment points along the southern coast. Alfa grass is a bulky material and space was required as the grass had to be initially dried and then kept dry prior to its being baled and then shipped.¹² Given the crucial importance of keeping

¹¹ FO 335/125/1 Carleton to Wood, Sfax, April 14, 1871 (translated from the Italian original).

¹² "...when [alfa grass is] damped with water a process of fermentation sets in due to the action of albuminous compounds upon the starch, gum sugar and woody fibre and such, aided by a process of eremacausin due to the oxidisation of the organic

the grass dry yet near to the port for ease of embarkation onto the ships space had to be rented in covered accommodation within the town walls. The obvious threat of fire posed by the large amounts of grass stored in close quarters within the town provoked a public outcry in both Sousse and Sfax, mainly from European residents fearing for their own safety and that of their houses, businesses and merchandise located close by. Ironically in both towns British (mainly Maltese) voices were to the fore in condemning the practice. Incensed, they wrote to Wood asking for his intervention in persuading the local government officials to enforce the removal of the grass to a safe distance from the towns. Requesting clarification of the problem Wood received a letter from his vice-consul at Sousse, Stevens, in which the scale of the problem was highlighted:

"The total deposit of sparto at present stands at between 60,000 and 70,000 cantars [about 3,500 tons] and the only available stores out of town in the hands of 4 Italian merchants can hardly contain 15,000 cantars so that the quantity actually stored by merchants of different nationalities, comprising many Tunisian subjects, within these walls and in the inhabited quarter of the town amount to 50,000 cantars and this quantity every day increasing."¹³

Wood immediately instructed Stevens to enter into discussions with the local Governor's representatives to try and find an equitable solution to the problem and, after protracted negotiations, both agreed that :

"..unless something is organised providing proper storage for esparto in some isolated part of the town it would be unfair and impracticable to oblige them to remove the esparto without indicating a proper place they can use".¹⁴

Stevens suggested the old rubbish dump situated just outside the town walls to the east but this was vetoed by local government officials and it was left to individual merchants to make their own arrangements. Perry Bury rented a plot of land immediately outside the town walls close by the jetty where they erected a yard and outbuildings serving as

constituents by the oxygen of the air, give rise to the heating of the esparto fibre...." and "...when such processes take place in the wet or damp grass stored in bulk...will...lead to the spontaneous combustion of the grass". *British and Colonial Printer and Stationer* no. 819, vol. XXXVII, no. 19, May 7, 1896, p.15.

¹³ FO 335/125/1 Stevens to Wood, Susa, September 8, 1871.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

offices and stores, which were completely enclosed so as to minimise the risk of fire spreading in the event of an accident.

At Sfax, where similar problems and protests emerged, Perry Bury again responded by renting a plot of land between the town and the sea upon which they built their yard and installed their presses.

Perry Bury, which was not only the first company to engage in the alfa trade in Tunis but also by far the largest, received the full backing of British consular officials for their operations. This was given for a variety of reasons. For the Consul Wood, a zealous, and formidable, defender of British interests against those of the other Powers, the alfa trade, which was almost entirely carried on for British requirements, offered considerable opportunities to strengthen his country's and, it must be said, his personal standing in Tunis at a time of increasing rivalry amongst the consular representatives of Britain, France and Italy. Although, unlike the other two countries, Britain had no interest in formal annexation of the country, there continued the strong desire to buttress the country's independence within the loose framework of the Ottoman Empire in keeping with Britain's overarching policy on the Eastern Question. Britain hoped that greater British commercial involvement in Tunis would offer a convincing counterbalance to any threat of annexation by France or Italy based on the grounds of safeguarding the commercial and financial interests of their own nationals. At the same time Wood, a fervent believer in the need for rapid economic development within Tunis as a means of turning around the financial dependence on foreign capital, viewed the new trade as a means of generating much needed tax income for the Beylical government.

At Sfax, Carleton's motives for backing the trade were, perhaps, a little more personal, seeking as he did, the appointment of his son to the British consular staff in the country:

"Should this enterprise...take its due course, as no doubt it must, I hope that we British Consular Agents may not be forgotten, assuring you for my part that I will use my utmost zeal and activity in furthering the views and interests of the promoters of such an enterprise".¹⁵

Thus, when Perry Bury discovered that the tribes, instead of plucking the new leaves from the stem, were cutting the plant at the roots and thereby unwittingly destroying it, Wood immediately instructed Carleton to meet with Assuna Gelluli, Caid of Sfax, who promised that he would:

"...take the necessary measures in order to caution the Arabs by means of their shiks [cheikhs] and hlifas [khalifas], to be careful in picking up said grass without destroying the roots.."¹⁶

4.8 Exports of Alfa Grass from Tunis 1870-1881

Despite the initial problems of storage the first year of the trade in alfa grass was an outstanding success dealings with the tribes being a good deal easier than most had expected. Nevertheless it is highly unlikely that exports even approached the 15,000 tons which Wood claimed for the period July 1870 to June 1871.¹⁷ British trade statistics make no mention of imports of alfa grass from Tunis in 1870 although 1,126 tons were classified as originating from unspecified countries other than Algeria and Spain.¹⁸ The following year imports from Tunis and Tripoli combined are given as 11,569 tons although if imports from Malta, which almost certainly originated in north Africa, are included, the true figure was probably as high as 14,850 tons. In his report on the trade of Susa for 1872, British Vice-Consul Dupuis put exports of alfa grass at 13,000 tons for 1871 and 1872 although it is unclear if this includes shipments from Susa alone or whether it includes returns from the consular agency at Sfax which was

¹⁵ FO 335/125/1, Carleton to Wood, Sfax, April 27, 1871.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ FO 335/127/2 Wood to Lord Granville, September 18, 1872.

¹⁸ The British Consul General in Tripoli, Drummond-Hay put alfa exports from that country at just 2,500 pounds sterling in 1870. Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1870.

also under Dupuis authority.¹⁹ The latter may be the case since the statistics of the Financial Commission which began with the levying of an export duty of 1/2 piastre per quintal in July 1871, state the trade from July to December 1871 as amounting to 4,181 tons and 9,907 tons for the full year 1872 from the country as a whole a total close to that given by Dupuis.²⁰ (See Table 4.1)

Table 4.1 Tunisian Alfa Exports 1871-1881

	Quintals	Tons
July - December 1871	83,301	4,181
January - December 1872	197,366	9,907
January - December 1873	200,478	10,063
January - December 1874	182,978	9,184
January - December 1875	233,631	11,728
January - December 1876	434,691	21,820
January - June 1877	306,232	15,371
October 1878 - October 1879		17,627
October 1879 - October 1880		24,153
October 1880 - October 1881		28,903

Sources: 1871-1877: Quai d'Orsay, *Correspondence Politique*, vol. 44, Inspection General des Finances a M.A.E., August 27, 1877; 1878-1881: AGT, E 76/1 *Releve Statistique des Exportations d'Alfa effectuee dans la Regence de Tunis de 1878 a 1887*.

It is difficult to understand how Wood arrived at his figure for exports of 15,000 tons between July 1870 and June 1871. The most likely reason for his exaggeration is that he was trying to force the Financial Commission to lower the export duty which it had initially fixed at 1/2 piastre per quintal in July 1871 but which it then raised to 1 piastre

¹⁹ British Parliamentary Papers (1873) LXIV, Report on the Trade and Commerce of Susa for the Year 1872.

²⁰ Until July 1871 no export tax was levied on alfa grass. See FO 335/125/1, Stevens to Wood, Susa, May 10, 1871.

per quintal in November of the same year. Both moves were extremely unpopular with local merchants engaged in the alfa trade as they were with Wood who viewed them as unjustifiably measured specifically at British interests in the country. Wood commented that the increased duty, which amounted to some 20% of the plant's value, had the effect "by enhancing the price, to lessen the exportation, which amounts to only 11,500 tons from July 1871 to June 1872".²¹

There may have been some truth in Wood's claim that the alfa grass could not carry the burden of export taxes levied upon it since, after great pressure from Wood on behalf of the merchants engaged in the trade, the duty was lowered at the end of 1872 to 1/2 piastre per quintal.²² The question of export duties was an important one in the Tunisian alfa trade in the nineteenth century particularly from the 1880's when the market price for alfa in Britain plummeted dramatically. This will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

Despite the sometimes large discrepancies in statistics of alfa exports from the country, it is clear that these early years in the trade were extremely successful. Shipments reached level which few would have imagined possible at the outset. By 1881 exports were close to 29,000 tons and alfa had become one of the country's top three exports by value, and by far the most important in terms of volume.

4.9 The Geography of the Alfa Trade

As mentioned above the alfa trade in Tunis in these early years was centred on Susa and Sfax. This was partly because they were the centres where Perry Bury, the pioneers of the trade, were based, and also because they were the only ports close to the alfa regions which enjoyed the benefit of customs posts. But the success of the

²¹ FO 335/127/2 Wood to Granville, September 18, 1872.

²² "The impossibility of competing with Tripoli where this article also abounds and where a duty of only 1% is levied...has induced the Finance Commission to reconsider its decision [to raise the duty] and to propose to the Government to reduce the duty from 20% to 10% and there is every possibility that it will accede". FO 335/127/2 Wood to Granville, Tunis, September 18, 1872.

trade during the early 1870's especially, had as much to do with the quality of grass found in the country as to any other reason. The quality of paper was largely, though not entirely, a function of the length of fibre found in the raw material. Alfa grass, in general, had a very short length fibre when compared with woollen and cotton rags, one of the reasons why it was originally considered a doubtful substitute in the manufacture of paper. Over time, as the processing of alfa fibre was refined by Routledge and others, this became less important than the other qualities which alfa paper possessed, namely its opacity and absorbency as well as its relatively low price and greater availability. In the early 1870's, however, when the use of alfa was still in its infancy, quality was a very important factor in demand for alfa grass. One of the advantages that alfa from Tunisia had over its north African rivals was that it was of a superior quality. This was particularly so of grass shipped from the port of Susa which originated in the high steppe. It was the quantitative and qualitative decline in Spanish production, together with increasing demand for the article, which had created the need for new sources of supply of alfa grass to feed British paper mills. Spanish alfa grass, which as late as 1869 accounted for 95% of British imports of the material, by 1878 made up only 27% of Britain's alfa imports (See Chapter Seven). The grass from the Tunisian high steppe was uniquely placed to exploit the problems in the Spanish trade in the early 1870's since it was widely regarded as second only to the finest Spanish grasses in terms of quality for the manufacture of paper.

Susa therefore, because of the avowed quality of its product, quickly became the undisputed centre of the Tunisian alfa trade from its very inception. Again, the data available, as with most statistics used to highlight the alfa trade in these early years, are somewhat less than reliable and those given below are intended as guides rather than quoted as hard fact. Tunisian customs statistics do not detail exports by port until the early 1880's. Nevertheless, as set out in Table 4.2, the use of customs data for the country's total exports, and British consular figures for individual ports of embarkation, give an idea of the relative importance of each in the overall trade.

Although some of the grass shipped from Susa originated in the low steppe close to the port, the majority came from the high steppe around the towns of Sbeitla, Kasserine

and Feriana. At around 150km from Susa the exploitation of these grasses was expensive due to the costs of land transportation by beast of burden over such a distance; nonetheless the price premium achieved was more than sufficient to offset the

Table 4.2 Exports of Alfa from Susa as % of Total Alfa Exports 1871-1875 (in tons)

Year	Total exports	Susa exports	Susa as percentage of total
1871	4,181	-	-
1872	9,907	5,000	50
1873	10,063	7,206	72
1873	9,184	5,231	57
1875	11,727	7,683	65

Sources: Total Exports : *Correspondence Politique* vol. 44
Susa Exports : Reports on the Trade and Commerce of Susa 1872, 1873, 1874 and 1876.

higher costs incurred in its exploitation during the 1870's at least.²³ In 1876 the export duties levied on grass shipped from Susa were tripled to 1.5 piastres per quintal, while those at Sfax were only doubled to 1 piastre per quintal; as the market price of alfa in Britain dropped markedly during the 1880's, alfa grass from Susa was priced out of the market. This will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

Further south the trade at Sfax was to some extent limited by the success of the alfa trade at Susa during the first years of the trade, since the grass arriving at the port was of an inferior quality to the Susa article (although it compared favourably with Algerian and Tripolitanian grasses). Another reason may simply have been that Perry Bury's existing business was stronger in Susa than it was at Sfax. In any case trading in alfa from Susa was somewhat easier than at Sfax because the alfa grass came from a relatively well defined area and was collected by a smaller number of tribal units,

²³ In 1872 Susa quality grass sold for £7 per ton in Britain while that from Sfax sold for only £5 per ton. FO 335/127/2 Wood to Granville, September 18, 1872.

almost always from the Madger and Fraichiche tribes. By contrast the grass arriving at Sfax came from much more disparate sources covering a vast extent of territory reaching inland from the port almost as far as the Algerian border, and as far south as the Matmata mountains. Its collection required dealings with a large number of tribes and tribal units.

Nevertheless the alfa trade at Sfax had one obvious advantage over its northern counterpart: although the grass grew over a wider area much of it was located relatively near to the coast. It was to prove easier, more efficient and ultimately less expensive to bring the alfa to collection points along the coast by camel or donkey from the hinterlands whence, after being weighed, dried and baled, the grass was taken by lighter to Sfax. Thus Perry Bury, and later other, smaller companies which began trading in the grass in Tunis such as Arbib, Nahum and Hassan, would send out their brokers to these strategic points on the coast where little camps were set up for that purpose. The principal shipping station was at Gabes which, although a tiny little town, was the most important trading centre on the mainland of southern Tunisia. Other were at Shebbah (or Chebba) 35 miles to the north of Sfax; Skira (or La Skira) 50 miles to the south of Gabes; Zarat 25 miles further south and Gourine (or Green) (Figure 4.2). Besides these there were those of lesser importance like Bou-Grara, a small but sheltered little bay in the Lac de Bibans between Djerba and the mainland, and Zarzis, close to the border with Tripolitania. Each of these little transshipment points had its own fairly well defined catchment area from which supplies of grass were drawn. At Zarat most of the alfa was delivered by the Haouia and Mzareth tribes; however, much of the grass was procured from amongst the Zraoua, the Ouled Aissa ben Rached fraction of the Beni Zid and the Beni Zelten, Haddache and Toudjane of the Ouerghemma tribe occupying the Matmata mountain range, as well as from a number of fractions of the Ouderna, notably the Beni Barka, Ghoumrassen and Douiret. Gourine was supplied by the little maraboutic tribe of the Mahboul and by the Rebenten tribe, whereas the Hazem frequented Skira.²⁴

²⁴ See S.H.A.T., report on the Matmata by the Officers of the Affaires Indigenes.

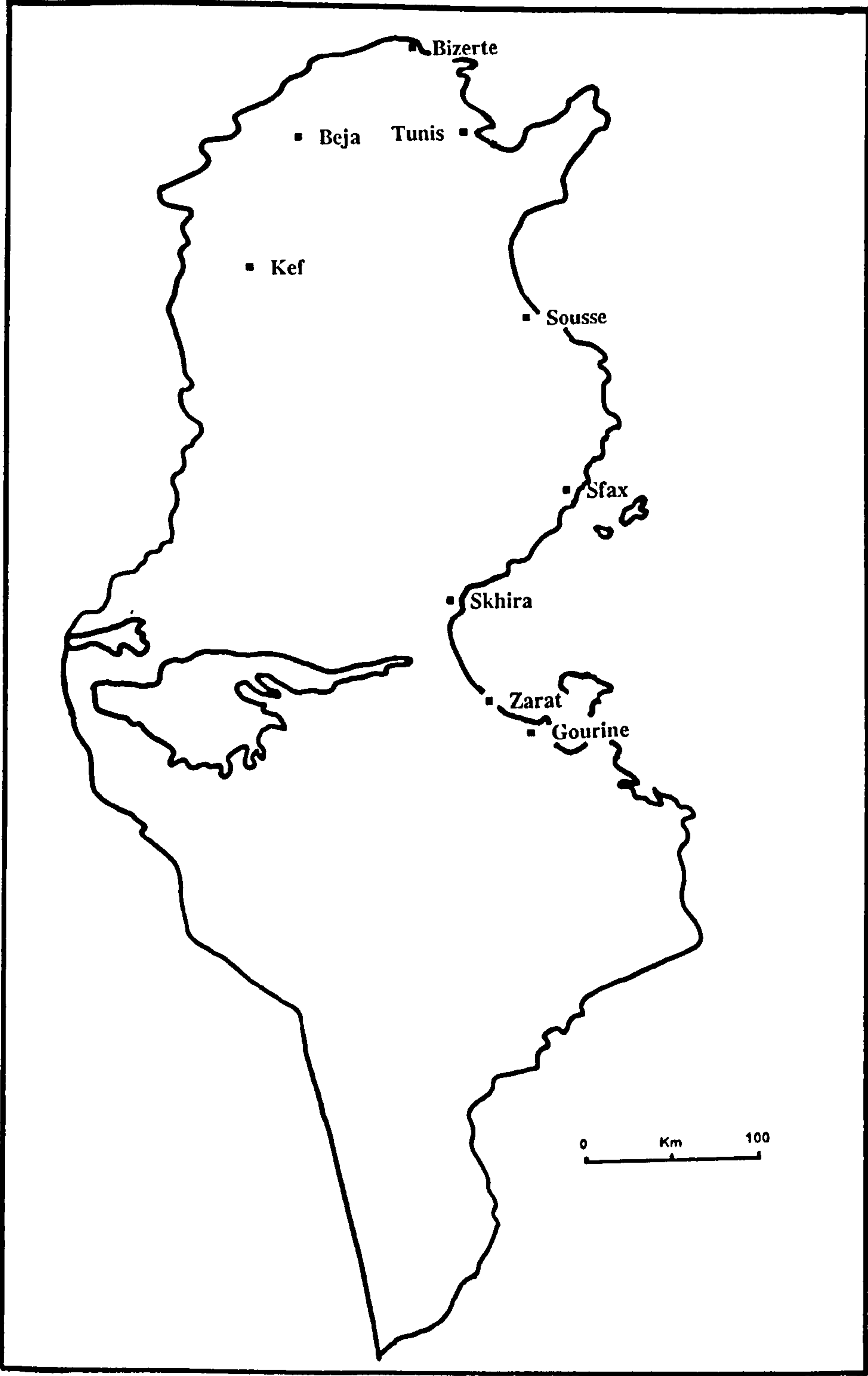


Figure 4.2 Main towns and ports

Facilities and accommodations at these places were of the most rudimentary nature. At Gourine, for example, the brokers lived in tents while those at Zarat occupied three small huts.²⁵ In 1874 Vice Consul Dupuis bemoaned the fact that as alfa is:

"...an article of considerable bulk, it is to be regretted that greater facilities are not met with by the collectors of it on the coast for packing and storing".²⁶

No-one was willing to incur the expense in constructing sheds which could have provided adequate protection for the grass if sufficient supply and demand could not be guaranteed on an on-going basis. This was still in doubt in the early 1870's. Even three years after the trade's inception the only improvement which Dupuis could report was but a partial response to the problem:

"... more care is now taken in stacking [the bales of alfa grass], experience having taught them how liable it is to perish in the wet season, exposed as it is to the open air for wants of proper sheds and storage".²⁷

Even at Gabes of which Carleton wrote in 1871 that it was "...about becoming a most important place for the great quantities of sparto it produces", facilities for the trade were extremely limited and poor.²⁸ Although there were some sheds at the town these were located on the banks of the river Akariat, about a mile inland from the sea and severe problems were faced attempting to ship the grass to the coast for loading onto the lighters which would take it to Sfax for export:

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ FO 335/132/7, Commercial Report for Susa, January 1, 1874.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ FO 335/125/1, Carleton to Wood, May 1871.

"... considerable trouble is experienced by them [the alfa merchants] in bringing the grass down when the sea is at all rough, on account of the bar formed by the accumulation of sand at the entrance. It sometimes also happens that navigation is altogether suspended from the choking up of the passage for the waters, and the sand has to be cleared away at considerable cost and labour. It is to be noted too that loaded boats can only pass freely up the river during the ten days at neap tide, and empty ones during the five days at spring tides."²⁹

The alfa trade on the southern coast while significant, was of lesser significance during the first half of the 1870's than that at Susa, though again it is difficult to quantify. Table 4.3 is an attempt at estimating Sfax's alfa exports by simply deducting British consular estimates of grass shipped from Susa, from Tunisian customs data of the country's total alfa exports:

Table 4.3 Estimated Alfa Exports from Sfax 1871-1875 (in tons)³⁰

Year	Total Tunisian exports	Sfax exports	Sfax as a percentage of the total
1871	4,181	-	-
1872	9,907	4,907	50
1873	10,063	2,857	28
1874	9,184	3,953	43
1875	11,727	4,044	34

Source : *Correspondence Politique*, vol. 44.

The true level of alfa exports from Sfax is, however, impossible to know during this period. In his Report on the Trade and Commerce for Tunis for the Year 1873-1874 Wood put exports of the grass from Sfax at between 7,000 and 8,000 tons. This would appear to be a gross exaggeration even allowing for alfa exported to countries other

²⁹ British Parliamentary Papers (1878) LXXIV, Report on the Trade and Commerce of the Port of Susa for the Year 1877.

³⁰ Clearly the calculated figure of exports from Sfax would include alfa shipped from Gabes from 1874. See below.

than Britain which were in any event very limited.³¹ In 1875 Wood, while giving no estimates of volume, put Sfax's exports of the grass at £15,900 compared with £29,040 at Susa.³² If we assume that the average value of grass from Sfax was £5 per ton this would equate to exports of close to 6,000 tons, giving the port a little over 50% of the Tunisian market.

4.10 The Opening of Gabes to International Trade

By 1874 the inexorable rise in British consumption of alfa grass, the continued decline in available supplies from Spain, together with the growing popularity of lower quality but cheaper grasses from Algeria and Tripolitania where the trade was expanding rapidly, led Tunisian merchants to develop the exploitation of the alfa in the far south of the country. Perry Bury, the most important traders in the material in Tunisia, was at the forefront of these changes. Encouraged by the opening of Gabes to international trade with the creation of a customs post there in 1874, Perry Bury set about re-organizing its business interests in the country with the aim of stepping up its operations in the far south. Gabes, along with Susa and Sfax, was to form an important part of a new business structure for the company which would enable it to better respond to changing conditions in the world market, and to fluctuations in local supplies. Susa, which was projected to remain the company's most important centre of business, was to be at the head of the new structure. Here the company appointed a Maltese merchant, William Galea, as managing director with responsibility to control and direct all of the company's business affairs in the Regency.

Although the Liverpool firm were to continue to purchase grass from independent merchants and also to place contracts with them for the delivery of specific quantities and qualities of the plant to the firm's yards, their plans for expansion in the south required a more permanent personnel to arrange for the collection, storage, drying and pressing of the material, as well as to oversee the chartering and loading of ships for

³¹ Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tunis for the Year 1873-1874.

³² Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tunis for the Year 1875, British Parliamentary Papers (1876) Vol. LXXVII.

final export to the U.K.. At Sfax the company chose an influential British merchant, Edward Leadbetter, to fulfil these functions. Another trader, of Maltese origin, was similarly employed at Gabes where considerable expense was incurred in upgrading facilities to make the centre suitable for alfa exports.³³ The firm constructed a large fenced alfa yard consisting of a house and extensive sheds close to the marina. While the other merchants engaged in the alfa trade at Gabes continued to group around the existing storage points on the river Akariat, Perry Bury, by locating on the coast, was able to bypass entirely the laborious, time consuming and costly procedures which had previously hampered their business on the river. From their new yard lighters could load and unload, making many trips per day either charging the cargoes of the ships which would travel directly to Britain or, alternatively, taking the grass to Sfax where it could be combined with other stocks there to make up a cargo. Martel notes that in 1874 four large steamships loaded 1,195 tons of grass for the first direct shipments to Britain from Gabes.³⁴ Despite this, loading at Gabes remained difficult due to the shallowness of the water at the little port. Ships had to anchor a couple of miles offshore and about 12 miles to the north.

Similar investment was undertaken by Perry Bury elsewhere. At Gourine, for example, 25 miles south of Gabes, it "purchased" on payment of a long term rent, a band of terrain 2km wide and twice as deep, completely encircling the settlement within which lay the only suitable loading place on the coast.³⁵

During the decade to 1881 Susa retained its position as the country's most important centre of export for alfa grass. This was, however, a situation which was to change dramatically in the following years. Susa had benefitted from its status as a supplier of quality alfa to the British market. By the middle of the 1870's, as British demand grew and as Spain's contribution to British alfa imports declined, market sentiment

³³ Each of the company's representatives continued to trade on their own account. Leadbetter was an important trader in olive oil, for example.

³⁴ Martel, A. (1965) p. 156.

³⁵ S.H.A.T., MR 3211, Rapport sur les Mehabeul, Bureau des Affaires Indigenes.

changed to one of quantity and price rather than quality. This became increasingly so from the mid 1880's, from which time Susa ceased to enjoy the pre-eminence in the Tunisian trade of these early years. This point is covered more fully in Chapter Seven.

4.11 Conclusion

Alfa grass had for many centuries played an important role in the Tunisian economy and society. But before the development of demand for the plant from British paper-makers its significance was more ecological than economic. As the principal vegetation cover in the desert and semi-desert environment of south and central Tunisia, alfa grass had a major influence in helping maintain environmental equilibrium. It helped bind the soil together, ameliorating the worst effects of wind and water erosion and providing much needed shade; it also served as humus formation, which enabled the growth of the small grasses that provided the livestock of the land's inhabitants a source of food. In a country bedeviled by drought, and where groundwater was scarce alfa grass also furnished many animals a source of nourishment as a last resort. Prior to 1870 the direct economic benefits of alfa were largely limited to its use in the small-scale production of artisanal, domestic products some of which were exported throughout the Mediterranean.

The pace in the growth of British demand for alfa during the late 1860's created the conditions for the emergence of an export trade in Tunisian alfa grass. Yet despite the country's enormous resources in the material there was a great deal of scepticism amongst local merchants as to the feasibility of developing a large-scale trade at that time. Unlike Algeria and Spain, the Tunisian government was unable to offer some of the preferential concessions which so characterised the trade in these other sources of the grass. Moreover, in Tunisia the grass grew in regions very weakly integrated into the increasingly outward looking coastal economy. Inhabited by nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes, these were regions where few coastal merchants had experience of doing any kind of business. The through caravan trade which did exist was under constant threat of attack from tribesmen and many were those who came to grief during journeys through the interior of the country. Apart from this the infrastructure for trade in such a bulky material as alfa grass did not exist and the distances over which

the grass would have to be carried over land without roads were often daunting.

In spite of all the problems, there developed throughout south and central Tunisia from 1870 a strong and vibrant trade in the material, almost all of which was exported to Britain for the manufacture of paper and paper products. Perry Bury, the pioneers of the trade in the Regency as they were in neighbouring Tripolitania, established a strong network of trading posts and of merchants and brokers throughout the alfa growing districts with such success that Reid was able to report of one of his journeys in the country in 1882 that "...the name of one English firm, Messrs Perry Bury and Co. of Manchester, seemed to be on the lips of all the traders in the Gulf of Hammamet".³⁶ But as early as 1873, British Vice-Consul Dupuis could report that alfa grass was, "...amongst the very foremost resources of this country".³⁷

Although available data on trade and commerce in the country in the pre-Protectorate period are few and often contradictory, even when they come from the same offices, as is the case with many British consular reports, there is no doubt that the alfa trade which developed was of importance, even using Tunisian Customs figures which are at the lower range of contemporary estimates. The rate of growth in the trade was little short of astonishing given the doubts which many had at the inception in 1870.

Within the space of a decade, exports had reached the remarkable level of almost 29,000 tons per annum. This represented something in the region of 300,000 man days of hard labour taking the average collection of one person in one day at 100kg.³⁸ By

³⁶ Reid, T.W. (1882). The French Consul General in Tunis wrote with regards the firm "...les etablissements considerables d'Halfa crees par la maison Perry Bury a Sousse, a Sfax et a Gabes la placent au premier rang du commerce etrangere dans cette Regence". Correspondence Politique, vol 64, esidence Francaise a Tunis a M. le President du Conseil, Ministre des Affaires Etrangeres, November 22, 1881.

³⁷ FO 335/163/2 Report on the Commerce and Navigation of the Port of Susa for the Year 1873.

³⁸ Experienced Spanish workers could reportedly collect up to 300 kg per day while the collectors in Tunisia rarely achieved 200 kg per day. This, however, was for male labour while women and children, who were almost exclusively occupied in the

the end of the decade alfa grass was one of the country's most important items of foreign trade, indeed in the year July 1879 to June 1880 it was by far the most important export by value (See Table 4.4.).

Table 4.4. Tunisia's Principal Exports July 1879-June 1880 (Piastres)

Olive oil	2,267,169
Wheat	938,347
Barley	101,556
Alfa grass	4,135,374

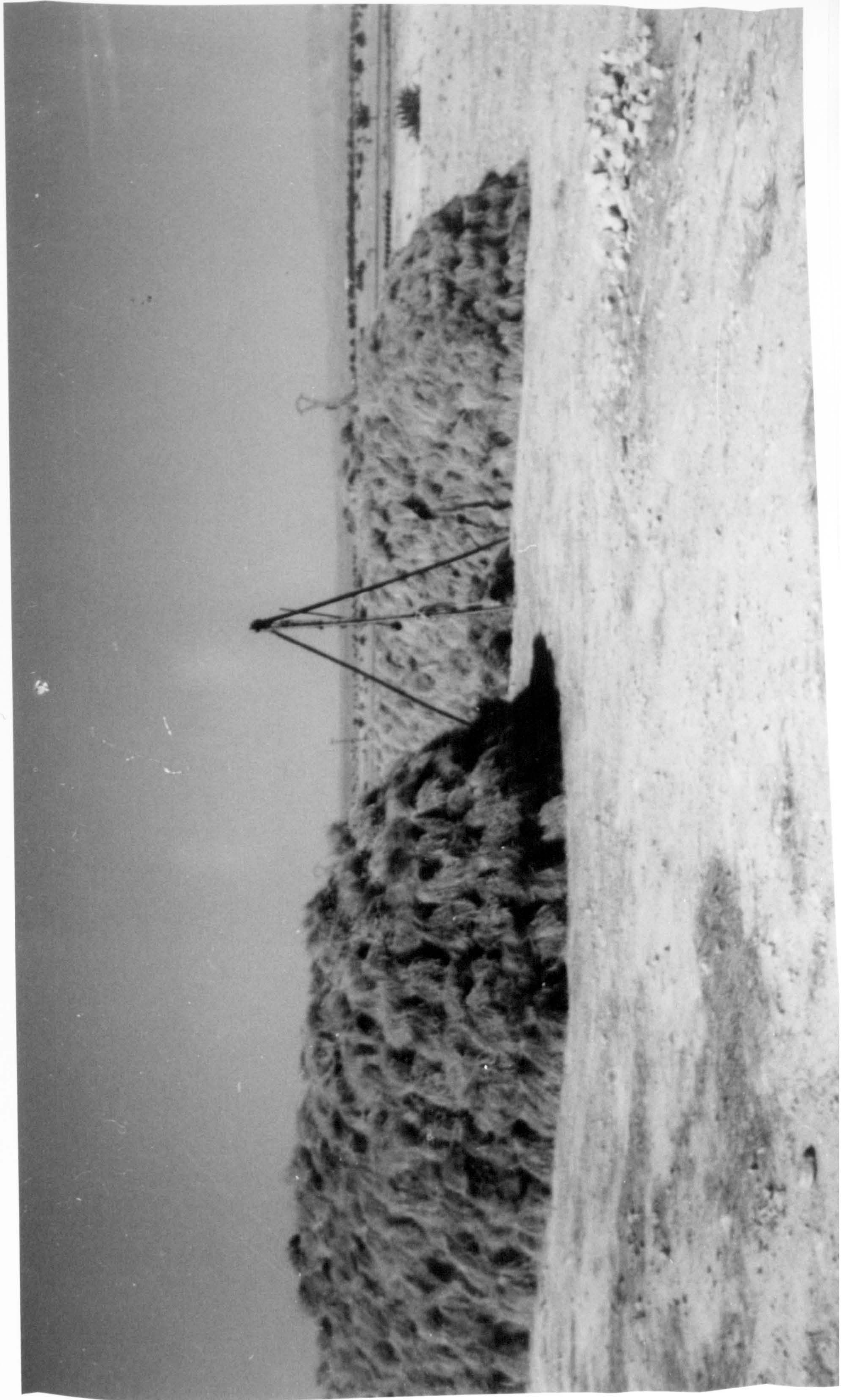
Source : AGT Serie E, carton 76, dossier 1, "Douanes", Rapport de M Paul Cambon, Resident General de la Republique Francaise, 1886, (Tunis, Imp. Francaise) p. 23.

Up to this point the discussion of the alfa trade in Tunisia has not really touched upon the reasons why any such trade, let alone one of such magnitude, should be established and indeed have flourished in the country at this time. The existence of external demand is not sufficient an explanation for the rapid rise in the trade in alfa. The central question remains as to why the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of southern Tunisia which, as discussed in Chapter Two, have been characterized by the degree of their political independence and economic self-subsistence, should so actively and willingly participate in a commerce directed by Europeans in the coastal towns. This, together with an attempt to understand the impact on the southern tribes of their sudden and direct incorporation into, not just the national, but also the international economy, will be discussed in the following chapters.

"...the stipa tenacissima appears destined to be the great civilising influence in North Africa".³⁹

collection of grass in the country, could only collect between 50 kg and 100 kg each day. See Fleury, V. (1900).

³⁹ Playfair, Lt. Col. (1877).



Chapter Five

A Marginal Socio-Economic Environment

5.1 Introduction

Aside from its sheer scale and rate of growth, what is perhaps most remarkable about this new branch of commerce in alfa grass, and what sets it clearly apart from established mercantile activities in Tunisia, is the fact that its success and development depended heavily on the participation of the tribal populations of the south and central regions of the country. Yet, as was discussed in Chapter Two, the prevailing view of such a tribal, pastoral and subsistence orientated society is one which emphasizes its inherently egalitarian social principles and relative lack of economic and social stratification. If one accepts this then the sudden, brusque emergence of a trade which for the first time and on a large scale linked the tribes, not only with the settled populations of the coast but also directly with the capitalist world economy, becomes difficult to comprehend. This is particularly so when it is considered that in Tunisia, unlike in neighbouring Algeria, there was no overt political action or state coercion to ensure tribal participation in the trade. Indeed the Government, the International Finance Commission and later the French Administration did very little to encourage the trade and, as will be discussed below, probably even hindered its competitiveness on a world scale through the maintenance of very high export duties. Why, then, should the tribes orientated to subsistence production enter into economic relations of such magnitude with European traders for whom they had hitherto exhibited little but contempt and often open hostility?

5.2 The Motivation for Alfa Collection

The single most important defining characteristic of tribal participation in the alfa trade in Tunisia was that the collection of the grass carried amongst the tribes, a very pronounced social stigma; it was universally considered the most demeaning of activities:

"...le fait d'arracher et d'aller vendre l'alfa...est consideree comme une besogne quelque peu degradante"¹

No doubt this was partly because despite its ubiquitous presence in the south it had little economic value except in the humble activity of craft production and, exceptionally, for the grazing of animals when no other pasture was available. But more than this collecting alfa grass was widely perceived as a manifestation of failure in the kinship society, a sign of weakness and of subservience to the infidel European merchants on the coast to whom it was sold. Patriarchal and warrior-like, the tribes maintained a proud, popular tradition, no matter how real or tangible, of independence from the central government and a strong sense of the cultural differences which separated them economically and socially from the settled populations. Peripheral to, though by no means isolated from, the developing market economy of the coastal regions, the tribes lived a subsistence existence in which wealth and prosperity were counted in the size of the family and of the animal herds they owned.² The lives of the tribes centred on their livestock which was always their principal preoccupation. Monetary income was far from being an important or common goal of the tribes and the use of money as a medium of exchange was highly unusual even by the middle of the nineteenth century.

Psychologically difficult to accept, the collection of alfa grass was also problematical in practical terms given the natural rhythms of tribal life since the plant was only really ready for gathering from early summer once the leaves had reached maturity. But the summer months were extremely hot and dry and the collection of alfa involved long hours of arduous work under the hot summer sun in regions largely devoid of shade. Moreover summer was a period when most tribes undertook the annual transhumance in search of pasture for the animals. These movements rarely took them to districts well endowed with alfa since the grass was not, in itself, the fodder of choice for any animal even though the young shoots of grass which grew in its shade did provide an important source of nourishment for a short period during spring and summer.

¹ S.H.A.T., Bureau de Renseignements (1885) *Rapport sur le Neffet*.

² Monchicourt, C. (1906).

Migratory movements of the tribes inhabiting the best alfa districts tended to be from south to north rather than from the interior towards the coast. The requirement for transporting the material for sale in the coastal depots and towns on the backs of camels and mules could entail return journeys in excess of 200km in length which was a gruelling prospect for any beast, more so if adequate pasture was not found on the way.

Finally, the pull factors encouraging tribal participation in the trade were negligible, the remuneration from the sale or transportation of alfa being minimal:

"...it is a poor material and barely sufficient to make up for the loss of the [cereal] crop".³

The decision to engage in the collection of alfa, or provide for its transportation, was not the result of a positive and rational choice between alternative returns to labour. It was never considered, and for the tribes at least, could never have provided a means of accumulating wealth. On the contrary the sale of alfa grass was almost always the product of economic need, of poverty, of destitution, a last resort in times of penury:

"...tribes only collect it [alfa] in years of scarcity when successive years have brought them deficient crops."⁴

The success of the alfa trade in Tunisia was more than anything a function of poverty and economic deprivation.

5.3 A Marginal Economy

After a tour of Tunisia undertaken in 1890, Amos Perry gave the following description of the market on the island of Djerba in the south of Tunisia:

³ British Parliamentary Papers (1874) LXXVI, *Report on the Trade and Navigation of Susa for the Year 1873*. Drummond-Hay wrote of the amount paid to alfa collectors in Tripoli in 1876 that "it is difficult to comprehend how camels and men can work for so little" citing the price per camel load as 8 shillings for grass brought from the interior at three days march (six days round trip). Report by Consul General Drummond-Hay on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1876.

⁴ FO 335/163/2, *Report on the Commerce and Navigation of Susa for the Year 1876*.

"Donkeys were braying, sheep were bleating, cocks were crowing and men were shouting. Glancing upon the scene from the windows, they beheld a motley multitude of men and animals some of them coming upon the ground and apparently struggling with others to get possession of the best stands. There were camel loads of charcoal brought from the continent across the shallow strait at the southern point of the island. There were bronzed faced men urging forward camels that were laden with the rich product of the Gereed [Djerid]. There were donkey loads of fruit and vegetables from neighbouring rural districts. There were men, women and children trudging along with their baskets full of the products of their respective industries. As, however, the exhibitors and salesmen gradually found their places in the turmoil and the uproar diminished a few animals alone continued to rend the air with their hideous and plaintive cries".⁵

Although Djerba was located in the very south of the country, Perry's portrayal of a vibrant market flush with the produce of many regions and from a variety of industries bears little resemblance to the reality of life amongst the majority of the population of the tribes on the continent. Whether or not the market scene depicted by Perry reflects a prosperous community in Djerba or not, the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes, just a short distance away across a narrow stretch of water, lived a precarious and sometimes miserable existence eking out whatever meagre return they could from the arid and hostile environment they inhabited.

Subsistence-orientated, the economic activities of the tribes were largely adaptations to the harsh environmental conditions which prevailed throughout south and central Tunisia. Extensive pastoralism was the pillar of the economy. In the northern steppe, amongst the Fraichiche, Madger and Zlass, sheep rearing predominated while further south in the more arid zones the goat and the camel became increasingly prevalent. Although some tribes, such as the Ouled Sidi Tlil in the high steppe, were almost continually on the move because of the lack of adequate pasture on their lands, summer transhumance was only undertaken out of necessity, the tribes preferring whenever possible, to stay on their own territory during the summer months.⁶ But more often

⁵ Perry, A. (1891).

⁶ S.H.A.T. MR 1323, dossier 19, Notice sur la Confederation des Fraichiches, du Village de Feriana et la Tribu de Ouled Sidi Tlil.

than not the lack of rainfall and the poor state of pastures in high summer led the tribes to move further afield in search of nourishment for their animals. The tribes of the more arid southern regions tended to move more frequently, over greater distances and for a longer duration than did those of the northern steppe. These were not vague movements but followed traditional inter-tribal relationships based on reciprocity or kinship. In the north of the high and low steppe, the summer transhumance from the steppe to the Tell was matched by a corresponding movement in winter from the Tell to the steppe where winters were milder and winter pasture more abundant.⁷

Agricultural production was very limited amongst the tribes. Average annual rainfall was almost everywhere below the 400mm minimum considered necessary for regular and successful dry cereal farming, and harvests also suffered from an unequal geographical and temporal distribution of precipitation. Combined with large seasonal and diurnal temperature variations and unpredictable winds, the potential for good crop yields was limited, particularly given the lack of groundwater for irrigation, the low level of production techniques and thin soils.

The land sown by the tribes was limited to the more fertile fields and those which were most favoured by the first autumn rains which, in helping break-up the hard soil, reduced the need for ploughing. The hardier barley crop was, in general, preferred to wheat because it was more resilient to climatic variations and could be harvested at least a month before wheat. The shorter length of time between sowing and harvesting reduced the risk that the crops could be compromised by the early appearance of the sirocco winds or of the locusts which was an ever-present hazard in the south from early summer.

If the autumn rains arrived on time and in the right amounts, the winters were not too cold, and the spring rains adequate to allow the young plants to reach maturity, a good harvest would be assured and this was a time of rejoicing and celebration. That grain which was not consumed, used to pay taxes or exchanged for other products with

⁷ Clarke, J.I. (1956).

neighbouring tribes or villages, was stored for consumption during the summer and to provide seed for sowing the following autumn.

But such years were the exception in southern Tunisia. In describing the disastrous conditions which prevailed in 1877 British Vice-Consul Dupuis wrote:

"It is generally said on this coast [Sousse] that but one year of really good crops can be reckoned out of every seven years, the rest being average ones or total failures. The truth of this assertion has been singularly enough verified these years past. The passage of winds, the south and south-east in particular (the hot, dry, sirocco winds) as regards their earliness or tardiness towards the fall of the year, when they predominate, it is affirmed, influences the fall of rain and also foreshadows the nature of the crops likely to result. Their too long delay in appearing before, or dominance after, the period of a general breaking up of the weather in the northern shores of the Mediterranean and their continuance beyond the middle of October as a rule (the case in 1876) is not considered favourable. They help to stave off atmospheric moisture and delay labour in the field beyond the period when copious rains, so essential to soften the ground, are to be expected; those which do occur later not being sufficient, and are, besides, too chilling for seed to germinate."⁸

Cereal production was a lottery for the tribes who were fatalistic about the outcome of their harvests commonly referring to wheat and barley as "Mi'ma", which means "manna from heaven".⁹ Although the tribes sowed whatever area of land their resources would allow the fate of their harvests was almost entirely dependent on the capriciousness of climate. Most of the time harvests were either nil or mediocre and yields often very low.

Except in years of exceptional or good rainfall, the south of Tunisia, generally, did not produce enough cereals for its own needs and the tribes had to secure the balance of their requirements elsewhere.¹⁰ For many southern tribes the opportunity to work

⁸ British Parliamentary Papers (1878) LXXIV, *Report on the Trade and Commerce of Susa for the Year 1877*.

⁹ Timoumi, H. (1975) p. 62.

¹⁰ S.H.A.T., MR 1323, dossier 19, Notices sur Hageb-el Aioun et les tribus Madjeur et Ouled Radhouane, April 11, 1887. The report comments that in 1886 the Ouled Radhouane harvested only 20,000qx of wheat and 26,000qx of barley which was

in the grain harvests in the Tell to the north provided a precious means of acquiring cereals. Because the cereal crops were both more reliable and better yielding in the more temperate climate of northern Tunisia and, as the wheat harvest there took place a month after that of barley in the south, the annual movement of southern tribes to the Tell with their animals was also an opportunity to work in the harvest. When yields were good in the north the tribes could earn up to one tenth of the harvest, although when poor, or when the offer of work was too great, this could be reduced to as little as one twentieth.¹¹

Cereals were not only the main article of subsistence of the population but they were also an extremely important means of exchange for other products which the tribes lacked. Thus, every winter, dozens of caravans of camels loaded with grain converged on the oases in the Djerid and Nefzaoua where they exchanged grain, which was produced in minimal quantities in the oases, against the dates which were grown there in abundance. For the tribes the dates were a significant foodstuff in spring and especially summer being both portable, highly nutritious and requiring little preparation prior to consumption.

The main wealth of the semi-nomadic and nomadic population was, of course, their animals and these were sold in the coastal markets and on those in interior usually to buy grain or to help pay taxes. The people of the little oasis of Tebbouba, on the coast south of Gabes, for example "font un assez grande commerce de bestiaux avec les fournisseurs de viande de Gabes".¹² In spring the fleeces of sheep and goats were also sold by the semi-nomads:

"Le commerce de laine se fait beaucoup plus generalement en dehors du marche periodique car elle est souvent et en grande partie, vendue sur pied a des Algeriens de Tebessa principalement qui, a cet effet, au printemps, au moment de la tonte, parcourent la region, allant de douar a doaur. Les operations

"absolument insufficants pour les besoins de la tribu".

¹¹ Timoumi, H., *op. cit.*, p. 68.

¹² S.H.A.T., MR 1323, dossier 15, Notice sur les Tribus des Gheraira, des Hamerna, des Hazem et Aleya.

portent dans ce cas sur la laine de troupeaux entiers estimee d'apres le nombre de toisons"¹³

In the southern oases of the Djerid and the Nefzaoua the sedentarists purchased wool from the nomads of the Beni Zid, Merazigue and Hammama tribes usually in exchange for dates. Renowned for the quality of their textiles the weavers in the oases found a ready sale to neighbouring tribes and to coastal merchants:

"Ils cedent les tissus aux juifs qui viennent de Gabes passer plusieurs mois dans le pays, en echange des calottes rouges, de chaussures, de cotonnades, depices et menu objets. Les juifs drainent aussi dans les memes conditions, les houllis fabriques chez les nomades".¹⁴

But most tribesmen had sufficient wool only for their own requirements to make clothes, such as capes (burnous and haik) and only the better off with more animals and surplus wool commercialised it.

The economy of southern Tunisia was not strongly commercialised even in the period immediately following the French occupation. Production was rarely undertaken for purposes of sale and only items surplus to the tribes immediate consumption needs were sold or exchanged. Given the rural base of the economy, transactions tended to fluctuate depending on climatic conditions although taxation also had a powerful influence (see below). Exchange was more important than direct market sale partly because of the charges levied on transactions in officially sanctioned markets. Also prices tended to be higher on the coastal markets for goods produced in the interior. Grain grown in the north and brought to the southern ports was more expensive than going directly to the producing regions which were, anyway, often the destination of tribes seeking pasture for their animals. Those nomads of the Nefzaoua, for example, who owned camels "vont au loin, chercher leurs grains sur les marches de Sbiba, du

¹³ S.H.A.T., Mr 1323, dossier 6, Tribu des Quartan, December 21, 1886.

¹⁴ S.H.A.T., Mr 1323, dossier 186bis, Nefzaoua, June 1887.

Kef, de Kairouan et chez les Fraichiches".¹⁵

5.4 The Effects of Drought on the Tribal Population

A single year of poor crops or inadequate pasture, or even a succession of mediocre crops was seldom a source of major concern for the tribes since a variety of mechanisms existed, besides the storage of grain to help ameliorate the social and economic impact of short-term crisis. Dates, for example, could be purchased by the tribes on credit from the villagers of the Djerid, and these could be exchanged in the north of the country for grain. This would provide for immediate consumption requirements while awaiting the outcome of the spring harvest when the debts would normally be repaid.¹⁶ The Tellien regions were also a very significant resource for the southern tribes as a source of pasture, grain and work and helped to offset short deficits in the south.

But years of severe drought caused tremendous difficulties for the rural population for not only were subsistence problems magnified but also their ability to maintain their capital, their livestock, and find seed to sow the following year's grain crops were greatly diminished. All the tribes' resources were intimately linked to climate in general and excessively dependent on the capriciousness of rainfall in particular and if cereals were the most susceptible to unfavourable climatic conditions it was only a matter of degree. The animals also suffered greatly from an extended period of deprivation of food and water. A poor harvest in 1876 which resulted in a reduction of land area sown by the southern tribes in the autumn of that year and a lack of rainfall which continued into 1877, caused acute subsistence problems for the population of the south. The failure of the harvest in spring of 1877 was exacerbated by an almost complete lack of pasture in the southern districts, the dry lands parched by the early arrival and prolonged presence of the sirocco winds:

¹⁵ S.H.A.T., MR 1323, dossier 18bis, Nefzaoua, June 1887.

¹⁶ MAE, Correspondence Politique, Rapports Mensuelles, September 1894: "Par suite de l'abondance de la recolte des cereales dans le nord de la Regence et dans le Department de Constantine, bon nombre de gens du Djerid se sont rendus dans ces regions pour recouvrir le montant des ventes de dattes faite a credit".

"In the autumn of 1876 very little seed was sown and it would be difficult to name a place on the immediate coast where wheat or barley ripened, or even came up to any height. The pastures also suffered and were quite inadequate to support the cattle a great number of which perished. As the spring of 1877 advanced the Arabs were forced to migrate, abandoning their lands the sterility of which afforded neither sustenance for themselves nor food for their cattle. The greater number proceeded to the northern provinces where the crops had been partially good; and many sought the towns, and thus spread misery, employment being difficult to find. With the augmented population the value of labour fell to its minimum and the interior nearly became depopulated of its Arab tribes. In the neighbourhood of Sfax the coast for 100 to 150 miles around to the south was quite deserted."¹⁷

Although it is impossible to know the extent of the loss of livestock during years of extreme and widespread drought, such as 1877, the French Bureau de Renseignements noted in the south in 1895, by no means as severe as 1877 or 1888, an average loss of 25%, camels being the only animals to escape relatively unaffected.¹⁸

Moreover in 1877, as in 1888, the effects of the drought were also felt in the northern provinces of the country not just the south. If the Tell provided many southern tribes a vital lifeline in years when drought struck the south, access to the pasture there was not accorded to all visitors. Although describing a later period when the extension of cultivated land in the north reduced the amount of pasture available to immigrants, Monchicourt writes of the antipathy of the population of the Tell towards the seasonal migrants:

"...les Telliens, m'a-t-on repete a satiete dans cette steppe, sont des gens sans grandeur d'ame et sans cour. N'exigent-ils pas un droit d'achaba (paturage) variant autour d'un sou par tete et par mois? Ne gardent-ils pas jalousement le moindre brin d'herbe? Ne se plaignent-ils pas sans cesse avec les autorites des plus petites empietements?"¹⁹

When crops and pasture were particularly poor in the north the capacity of the Tell and

¹⁷ British Parliamentary Papers (1878), LXXIV, *Report on the Trade and Commerce of Susa for the Year 1877*.

¹⁸ MAE, Correspondence Politique, *Rapports Mensuel*, April 1895.

¹⁹ Monchicourt, C. (1906) p. 189.

the willingness of the people there to absorb large numbers of men and animals from the south was much diminished. In 1877, for example, amid fears of violent disputes over access to limited pasture between the tribes of the north and south the government tried to control and limit movement to the Tell. A request from the Caid of the Fraichiche, a tribe in the northern high steppe which habitually pastured in the Tell during the summer, to allow his people to move north with their livestock was turned down by the Prime Minister. Instead the Fraichiche were only allowed to send their most impoverished fractions northwards which had to be split into five groups each headed by a tribal notable and which were permitted to locate solely on five distinct areas determined by the government.²⁰

After successive years of drought and crop failures, or during years such as 1876/1877 and 1888/1889 when drought visited the whole of the country including the northern provinces, the southern tribes were left with little to fall back on within their own lands and limited opportunities for finding work and pasture in the north.

Inevitably with pasture difficult to find and markets flooded with animals for sale, the value of animals and animal products fell during years of drought, and for the tribes this was compounded by the equally inevitable rise in the price of grains.²¹ The problem was further complicated if, as often happened, the grain crops in Tripolitania also failed as occurred in 1887. In that year the Controleur Civil of Djerba reported the arrival of a merchant from Benghazi with 100,000 francs to purchase grain, pushing the price up from 75 to 125 piastres per caffiz.²²

Without a grain crop and with the possibility of, at best, a much reduced income from the sale of their animals mere subsistence became paramount. One of the only natural

²⁰ Smida, M. (1970) p. 199.

²¹ S.H.A.T., Bureau de Renseignements, dossier 28, Tribu des Matmata, April 19, 1886. The report notes that in the drought afflicted southern mountains of the Matmata in 1886, value of sheep and goats fell by three quarters.

²² M.A.E., Nouvelle Serie, vol 45, Vice-Consul et Controleur Civil, Djerba, July 29, 1887.

resources which was largely impervious to low rainfall was the prickly pear, or barbary fig, which was an important source of nourishment for both animal and human populations alike. Its geographical extent, however, was limited mainly to the northern low steppe it being susceptible to the extreme cold which was often experienced in the high steppe in winter. The lands of the Zlass tribe were particularly abundant in the prickly pear and provided the tribe, and the Hammama who pastured there in summer, an appreciable resource in difficult years. Although sold in the coastal markets the fruit was not a significant means of generating income for the tribes and was used much more simply as a source of sustenance.²³ It was not, however, one which could support the entire animal and human populations. Many were forced to resort to desperate measures just to ensure survival during such crises:

"In the straits to which the Arabs were reduced their principal diet consisted often of bread made with barley meal mixed with olive cake, preserved locusts, and prickly pears...locusts were collected during the night from the trees which they bore down with their weight, and carried to the villages where they were boiled in brine and, after being dried in the sun, were sold openly on the market and eaten as shrimp are with us".²⁴

But if immediate subsistence needs were paramount under such circumstances the tribes also had to find seed for the following year's crop without which subsistence problems would only be aggravated and prolonged.

Some were able to take out loans from merchants and traders in the coastal towns and villages with which to procure food and seed but these were always given under guarantee of property or the future harvest and always at high rates of interest:

²³ Monchocourt, C. (1906).

²⁴ Report by Vice Consul Dupuis on the Trade and Commerce of Susa for the Year 1877, op. cit.. Dupuis continues: "the locust is not generally eaten in Mohammedan countries from choice; but when it is considered that dog's flesh is consumed here it is not surprising that, under the circumstances, the locust should be openly sold as an article of food".

"La situation de notre caïdat s'est détériorée du fait de nos transactions en cas de besoin avec les usuriers, qui sont les commerçants à Sfax, et qui nous prêtent à un taux de 33% pour six mois...Quand on se trouve dans la nécessité ceci arrive en printemps et en hiver, il nous en fait des avances sur la récolte des céréales qu'on leur rend à très bas prix"²⁵

Such loans could easily lead the borrower into a vicious circle of debt and debt repayment. If the harvest against which the loan was taken out was good grain prices would fall and repayments would be higher than the prevailing market value since the advances were calculated on the value at the time the loan was taken out. If the harvest was poor new loans would be necessary but these would be at the higher prices reigning under these market circumstances. The operation was similar to that frequently resorted to by the olive growers of the Sahel:

"[the merchant] invests, say, 1500 piastres for 100 metels of oil at 15 piastres per metal, price at its minimum in good years, delivery at the olive crop. Should it fail and the oil not be forthcoming, the 100 metels of oil are reckoned at the new market prices, say 35 piastres, and the sum figures, in consequence, in the new deed as 3500 piastres for 233 metels of oil at the old rate, to be delivered next season".²⁶

This practice, of long standing in the country, had, by the 1870's, led to the widespread indebtedness of the Sahelian olive growers. While never a common feature of the tribal economy, mainly because of the difficulty faced by the lender in enforcing repayment because of the mobility of the people, such transactions were not altogether unknown.

The effects of famine caused by successive years of drought was often made worse by the appearance of disease which could ravage the starving population. In Chapter Two we reported Valensi's belief that the size of the country's population may have varied by as much as a factor of two between periods of prosperity and periods of natural calamity. In the nineteenth century, which was marked by a number of severe natural disasters the excessive fiscal exactions of the Beylical government inflicted

²⁵ M'Halla, M. (1978), p. 97.

²⁶ BPP (1878), LXXIV, *Report on the Trade and Commerce of Susa for the Year 1877*.

immeasurable damage on the population already suffering from severe drought. In the aftermath of the tax increases imposed in 1863 and 1864, which left much of the population economically exhausted, the exceptionally bad drought of 1867 and the cholera and typhoid which ensued was reported to have taken the lives of thousands throughout the country. Although impossible to verify and certainly an exaggeration, 1867 was without doubt a year of tremendous human tragedy throughout Tunisia. One lady correspondent of *The Times* graphically reported on the situation in Tunis itself thus:

"They have had two years of no rain and besides a plague of locusts; they have lost every means of living and I have seen numbers of them daily too much exhausted and too near death to be able to rise and buy bread with the money given to them....I saw the Irish famine but it was not nearly as bad as what I saw at Tunis".²⁷

The French officers of the Bureau de Renseignements believed up to three quarters of the Fraichiche tribe may have perished as a result of the famine and the disease which ensued.²⁸

Drought, famine and disease were almost endemic in Tunisia and kept a Malthusian check on population growth and economic development. For the survivors there remained the need to buy seed for sowing the new harvest, and time for the herds to regenerate. There also remained taxes to pay and mouths to feed.

Under these circumstances, despite the negative perception of alfa collection, the hard work involved and the minimum income earned from its sale, the alfa trade brought a means of survival to many of the tribes in southern Tunisia. Uniquely amongst the country's natural resources, alfa grass was to a great extent resistant to extremes of rainfall and temperature, to strong winds, hailstorms and even locusts. Moreover it was not a crop in the sense that it required neither planting, maintenance nor attention and regenerated itself naturally. It grew wild over vast tracts of territory otherwise

²⁷ *The Times*, March 17, 1868, p. 44.

²⁸ S.H.A.T., Bureau de Renseignements, carton M 1323, dossier 19, "Notice sur la Confederation des Fraichiches, le Village de Feriana et la Tribu de Ouled Sidi Tlil".

largely devoid of vegetation or of reliable economic and ecological resources. Always available and free to whosoever wanted to make use of it the country's rich and renewable alfa reserves were transformed, almost overnight, from a minor resource of limited economic value, to one of paramount importance to many tribes in times of hardship:

"This fibre is of inestimable value to the natives when other crops failed as it grows through good years and bad years. The Arab falls back on this resource chiefly in times of scarcity when successive years have left them without their usual provisions of grain and when their flocks and other means of meeting taxation have been reduced".²⁹

Alfa grass became a precious resource amongst a population almost entirely at the mercy of climate:

"During the failure of the olive and other food crops it saved, I am told, the natives from utter starvation".³⁰

Britain's Consul General in Tripoli, Drummond-Hay reported a similar role for alfa grass in his district:

"...the cutting and transportation to the coast of this article of commerce has, in these two years of scarcity, proved a godsend to the starving population, as many as 600 camel loads a day arriving at this port from the surrounding country".³¹

The Tunisian tribes never collected, transported or sold alfa grass unless they were forced to by dint of necessity and to a large degree the supply of alfa was "regulated according and in inverse ratio to the grain crop".³² When the grain crop was good, and pasture adequate for the animals, "the Arabs, who are naturally indolent, will

²⁹ FO 335 164/1, *Report on the Trade and Commerce of Susa for the Year 1885*.

³⁰ FO 335 132/1, *Commercial Report for Susa, January 1, 1874*.

³¹ FO 160/86, *Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1873*.

³² British Parliamentary Papers (188) LXXVII, *Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1888*.

abandon the not very remunerative occupation of cutting and transporting esparto".³³

The early 1870's was fertile ground for the start of the alfa trade in Tunisia following the disaster of 1867/1868 and the mediocre performance of agricultural production in the early years of the decade.³⁴ But the first year of good rains in 1874 witnessed a downturn in exports of grass. At Sousse, for example, where 39,400 imperial quarters of wheat and 18,114 imperial quarters of barley were exported in 1874, shipments of alfa fell by nearly 30% to 5,231 tons compared to the previous year.³⁵

Although without doubt an exaggeration to link the level of alfa collection solely to the grain harvest (see Chapter Seven) there was a clear relationship between the two. While, in itself, an imperfect measure of the state of the population in rural Tunisia, using cereal exports as a surrogate for climatic conditions bears out the importance of alfa to the tribes in years of economic difficulty.

Table 5.1 Wheat, Barley and Alfa Exports from Sousse, 1874-1876

	Wheat (Imperial Quarters)	Barley (Imperial Quarters)	Alfa (Tons)
1874	39,400	18,114	5,231
1875	9,760	15,212	7,683
1876	245	-	8,476

Source : BPP (1877), LXXXIII, *Report on the Trade and Commerce of Susa for the Year 1876*.

³³ *Ibid.*.

³⁴ Wood wrote that while investigating the potential of the alfa trade in the 1870's as requested by McLean and Hope, "some English parties commenced to purchase it [alfa grass]; and as at that period the crops had failed the Arabs immediately turned their attention to its collection and abundantly supplied the market with it". FO 335 127/2, Wood to Granville, September 18, 1872.

³⁵ FO 335 132/1, *Commercial Report for Susa 1874*.

Taking again the example of Sousse, shipments of alfa increased markedly in 1875 and particularly in 1876 when grain exports slumped (see Table 5.1).³⁶

Poor crops in 1876 were followed by a complete failure of the harvest in the south and a mediocre crop in the northern provinces in 1877 (see above) and during this period alfa exports increased sharply peaking, as described in Chapter Four, at 29,000 tons in 1881 although. In general the 1870's was a period of prolonged climatic and environmental crisis in rural Tunisia and the level of alfa exports in this period reflects that.

Table 5.2 Exports of Wheat, Barley and Alfa Grass 1886-1891 (Kg 100's)

	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891
Wheat	443,175	413,447	57,496	256,166	686,996	656,025
Barley	210,209	348,709	19,984	107,138	561,824	584,402
Alfa Grass	125,756	140,553	216,088	255,615	210,002	146,632

Source: Regence de Tunis, Protectorat Francais, Direction Generale des Finances (1897) *Statistiques Commerciales de la Tunisie*

Although the 1880's was a much more prosperous decade for the Tunisian population than the preceding ones the latter years was another period of exceptionally bad climatic conditions, similar in severity to 1877. In 1888 the harvest failed completely in the south while the north was only marginally less affected by the lack of rainfall. Table 5.2 shows the sharp reduction in cereal exports from Tunisia in 1888 and 1889. Wheat and barley exports, which combined exceeded 65,000 tons in each of the two preceding years, slumped to only 7,500 tons in 1888 and a little over 35,000 tons in 1889. More dramatically, perhaps, the level of cereal imports surged in these years reaching 5.5

³⁶ In his report on trade at Sousse in 1876, Vice Consul Dupuis warned "...at this date the country is as dry as midsummer and seed that is sown is now mostly lost. If the worst anticipations are to be realised there will remain only to the impoverished many, as a last resort to save them from starvation, the esparto grass and this due to British trade". British Parliamentary Papers (1877), LXXXIII, *Report on the Trade and Commerce of Susa for the Year 1876*.

million francs in 1888 from less than 100,000 francs in 1886 and 1887 (Table 5.3). The severity of the agricultural crisis was instrumental in pushing alfa exports up by

Table 5.3 Imports of Cereals by Port 1886-1891 (Francs)

Port	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891
Tabarka	-	-	-	395	-	810
Bizerte	-	-	-	10,320	-	-
Goulette	30	31	510,306	179,301	150	150
Tunis	5,756	5,602	1,248,770	1,210,023	159,503	418,166
Ghardi- maou	-	-	-	3,989	-	-
Sousse	695	1,684	896,446	461,896	289	193
Monastir	-	-	293,656	105,158	-	-
Mahdia	-	-	290,558	201,932	300	-
Sfax	-	6	1,228,887	878,307	118,836	9,911
Gabes	66,189	55,989	779,547	844,151	75,713	1,116
Djerba	23,863	13,306	223,560	314,644	77,318	67,907
Total	97,743	76,609	5,503,552	4,331,264	439,572	559,483

Source : Regence de Tunis, Protectorat Francais, Direction Generale des Finances, Direction des Douanes, *Statistique Commercial de la Tunisie, Importation-Exportation, Annees 1885-1891* (Tunis, Imp. Francaise, 1897)

over 50% on 1888 and in 1889 shipments of the material reached over 25,000 tons, a figure only once achieved (in 1881) in the preceding 17 years since the alfa trade began.

5.5. Reactions to Supply Problems by Alfa Merchants

Although by no means a simple relationship, the collection of alfa grass undoubtedly increased in years when crops and pasture were poor and especially after successive years of economic hardship amongst the tribes. For the merchants this posed a problem since it was extremely difficult to foretell the possible level of purchases of grass from

the tribes. In good years one would expect a similar phenomenon to that which occurred in Tripoli in 1878:

"...the Arabs who bring it [alfa] down to the coast found more profitable employment in the year as reapers, the wheat and barley crops having proved abundant in the esparto districts. These crops, moreover, being raised principally by the men who are usually employed in the carriage of esparto, much of their time was taken up in the gathering of their harvests and, as a consequence, less grass came to the market.³⁷

Large fluctuations in supply, and particularly unexpected variations, created difficulties for the local merchants who signed contracts with British commodity brokers which provided for the delivery of specific quantities of grass at agreed prices, and on a predetermined date. Space on ships had also to be contracted and as these were generally filling their cargo on the homeward leg of a journey which brought them to the southern Mediterranean to sell mainly coal, sometimes iron ore, their timing offered little margin for error. Usually paid for in a lump sum in advance, if sufficient grass was not available on the arrival of the ship either the cost of the cargo paid for a full load had to be borne by the reduced shipment or alfa would have to be purchased, at whatever cost, in order to complete the load. This was what occurred at Tripoli in 1888:

"Merchants experienced great losses...in esparto owing in a great measure to their own imprudence in having vessels chartered before they had collected and prepared sufficient cargoes for them. It not infrequently happened that a ship arrived before the shipper had collected a cargo and he was then obliged to pay almost ruinous prices for it".³⁸

To counteract such problems the alfa merchants employed a variety of techniques to ensure some degree of continuity in supply and stabilise prices. As in most commercial enterprises stock holding was an unavoidable evil of the alfa trade. The arrival of grass at the collection points and shipping stations was unpredictable just as the chartering

³⁷ British Parliamentary Papers (1878/79) LXX, *Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1878*.

³⁸ *Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1891*. See also Appendix 2 which is a copy of a contract entered into by Perry Bury for the shipment of alfa grass.

of ships to Britain was never entirely reliable whether due to weather conditions or normal delays in the loading and unloading of the vessels' principal cargo on the outward leg of the journey to the Mediterranean. In between the arrival of grass from the interior and its dispatch to Britain there was all the manipulation of the material, cleaning, sorting, drying pressing and baling required to make the grass ready for shipment.

But the existence of stocks was also a reflection of speculative purchasing by the merchants. When supplies of grass were plentiful the buyers' leverage over the tribes increased significantly and the prices offered for grass would diminish. Merchants would often buy grass, uncovered by contracts with British brokers, in years of severe drought in the hope of realising a higher profit in the future. At the same time they were able to use a range of other techniques with which to exploit, in a ruthless fashion, the poor tribesmen hoping to procure resources through the sale of alfa. Such measures, which included a variety of deductions made on the weight of alfa brought to the market, commissions and other extra-official charges levied on the tribes, or simple extortion, were so widespread in the trade as to make the nominal purchase price offered to the tribes almost meaningless. Arriving at the collection point or shipping station, often after a long journey from the interior, the tribes were in no position to bargain prices with the merchants who often operated as a cartel to keep prices down. At Gourine, a little bay in the far south, Perry Bury and the Arbib house were represented on the spot by Eliaau and Braham Cohen "de sorte que ces commercants forment une sorte de societe, dans laquelle les parts varient avec les fonds avances"³⁹ Perry Bury, however, was clearly the dominant partner in the commercial agreement, renting a large amount of land around the crude port facilities such that "nul ne peut débarquer chez lui sans payer redevance".⁴⁰

Understanding that whatever grass was brought in was bound to be offered for sale, the merchants sought to extract the maximum value from the tribes. Non-monetary

³⁹ S.H.A.T., MR 1321.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*.

transactions, which were more common than cash sales, were often achieved, not by a simple exchange of grass for goods, but through the delivery of bonds to the seller (see Chapter 6). A practice more widespread in the twentieth century, the use of bonds, or promissory notes normally redeemable for merchandise at a store belonging to the alfa merchant, or a close associate, not only saved the merchants an up-front cash payment, but allowed them to recover some of the value paid for alfa by furnishing goods, at elevated prices, to a captive market (see Chapter 8). Rarely did the tribes emerge as winners in the strict business equation of cost and value in the alfa trade. Although those collectors, lacking animals with which to take the grass to the market and who had, therefore, to pay third parties for transportation, understood perfectly the relationship between cost and final income, for most tribes the cost of collection was a question of time and effort while the value of alfa was a function of subsistence needs.

Practices such as those outlined above, were used by merchants to reduce prices paid to collectors to a minimum but they could only be successful when supply outweighed demand. This was not always the case. Under these circumstances the merchants tried to encourage the tribes to furnish alfa grass by sending their brokers out into the countryside to offer tribes payment in advance of delivery:

"Advances are made for that which is yet to be pulled and got ready for transfer to the coast. Buyers are sometimes sent out to an Arab encampment which serves as a centre and take with them money or goods (the latter generally), oil and cloth (last year barley) which they barter for the grass and bring to the coast".⁴¹

In order to guarantee that the grass would indeed be delivered, payments were often made via the notables of the tribal group or through the Caid who would redistribute the income amongst those who participated. This form of operation had the added advantage to the merchants that if sufficient quantities of grass were not forthcoming pressure could be put on the Caid to comply with the agreement. It was, of course, in the Caid's interest to see his people receive additional income since they were his

⁴¹ *Report on the Trade and Commerce of Susa for the Year 1877.*

main source of wealth via the taxes levied on them. An example of this type of operation is examined in the following chapter with respect to the Mehedba tribe near Skhira.

Sometimes these contracts with tribes were longer term than the immediate harvests if the merchants had committed themselves to supply contracts with British brokers or if it was felt that a significant price advantage could be obtained during years when some tribes were experiencing economic difficulty. In April 1885 the French house of Grawitz, also acting for Perry Bury, entered into a contract with the Ouled Aziz fraction of the Hammama tribe which, at 7 piastres per quintal, provided the tribe with 80,000 piastres in advance for a commitment to deliver grass to the company's yard over the following 18 months.⁴²

Such contracts were not always successful however. In 1877, for example, a Maltese merchant from Tripoli, Gaetano Falzon, negotiated terms with the notables of tribes inhabiting the mountains close to the Tripolitanian border, for the delivery of 2,000 cantars of alfa (about 100 tons) to the little port at Bugarah. The grass arrived two months late, incurring significant additional expense for the merchant as his boat, and its crew, was laid up on the coast for the whole period. Despite holding a legal contract signed by all parties and repeated requests to local government officials and British consular staff, Falzon never received compensation.⁴³

Although advance payment and contracts with tribes to supply alfa did not always work without problems they did help soften the peaks and troughs in supplies of alfa created by sharp variations in environmental and economic conditions in the interior of the country.

⁴² AGT Serie E, Carton 233, Dossier 10, M. le Directeur des Douanes a M le Directeur des Finances, June 7, 1885. This contract was at least in part, provoked by the uncertainty regarding alfa collection in the country arising from the concession accorded the Franco-English Esparto Fibre Supply Company. See chapter 6.

⁴³ AGT Serie Historique, carton 28, dossier 414.

5.6 The Collectors

If the overall supply of alfa grass from the tribes fluctuated from year to year, higher in years of severe drought, lower during periods when the level and distribution of rainfall were more favourable, there was, nonetheless, throughout the trade's existence until the end of the nineteenth century, an apparent base volume of collections reflected in a certain stability of exports of the material which, in "normal" years, hovered around 14,000 tons per annum. In a year of especially bad drought in the south not all regions or tribes were similarly affected just as when rainfall and pasture was generally good local or regional exceptions were common. After the severe difficulties caused by the drought of 1887, 1888 and, to a lesser extent, 1889, in 1890 there was a marked improvement in environmental conditions throughout the southern districts. Pasture recovered and crops and yields generally improved. But in the region of Gafsa the copious rains which fell did so in the form of heavy rainstorms which, combined with strong winds, caused the destruction of thousands of animals swept away in the ensuing floods, and damaged countless homes and date palms. During a tour of inspection in the region, the officers of the Bureau de Renseignements wrote of the little village of Sekket:

"la population...est dans la misere; des annees consecutives de secheresse ont cause la ruine de tous les habitants et oblige un grand nombre d'entre eux d'emigrer pour subvenir aux besoins de leurs familles. 68 individus sont actuellement a Gafsa, dans les villes du nord de la Regence et en Algerie".⁴⁴

The Ouled Maamar, alone, was reported to have lost 4,000 sheep and goats in the tempest in the aftermath of which the tribe's "terrains de parcours ne presentent que de paturages maigres et de peu etendue, les terres laborables leur font defect".⁴⁵ In a land where water was such a precious resource such storms were a cruel, if not entirely exceptional, irony.

Regional variations in the severity, or benevolence, of climatic conditions together with

⁴⁴ AGT Serie A, carton 196, dossier 1, "Rapport etabli a la suite de la tournee executee du 24 Janvier au 10 Fevrier dans les tribus du Djebel, Ouled Aziz, Oulad Sidi Abid Hamadi, et dans les oases du Djerid".

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*.

the mechanisms used by merchants to stabilise supplies meant that there was little likelihood of a complete cessation of alfa collection throughout the country. Most of the tribes of south and central Tunisia slipped in and out of alfa collection depending on their immediate economic circumstances and needs:

"L'alfa est une denree avec laquelle chacun est toujours sur de faire un peu d'argent; c'etait donc principalement le besoin de numeraire qui determinait la plus ou moins grande activite de la recolte".⁴⁶

Some, however, tended to be, if not specialists, at least more regular participants in the alfa trade. There was what could almost be called a "hard core" of tribesmen, living constantly on the edge of poverty, for whom alfa grass was more than a just a useful short term source of income but rather an almost constant economic necessity.

Perhaps the most important tribes collecting the grass were those of the Hammama and the Mehedba the former inhabiting the region around Gafsa, the latter located in the hinterlands of Skhira on the coast between Sfax and Gabes. The reason for the importance of alfa to the Mehedba may have been to some extent specific to that tribe. Located closest to the alfa yards of the Franco-English company the problem of transporting the grass to the coast for sale was relatively insignificant even if the average number of camels belonging to the members of the tribe was only one.⁴⁷ In addition a large part of the tribe had actively participated in the rebellion against the invasion of French troops in 1881. Several years exile did not exonerate them from the taxes which they should have been paying in Tunisia and these had accumulated over the years to form a considerable sum of debts due on their return (see Chapter 6).

The effects of government taxation had a significant impact on the tribes' economic situation in both prosperous and hard times but was a particularly heavy burden in years of drought when the tribes resources were heavily depleted. While the achour (tax on grains) and the kanoun (tax on olives) varied with the state of the harvests the medjba (or poll tax) which was by far the heaviest fiscal charge levied on the semi-nomads,

⁴⁶ De Lanessan, J. (1917) *La Tunisie* 2nd edition Paris: Felix Alcan.

⁴⁷ S.H.A.T., MR 1323, dossier 17, Tribu des Mehedba, January 12, 1886.

was fixed and had to be paid irrespective of the economic circumstances of the tax payer. Wholly unpopular with the population the sharp increase in the level of the medjba, which rose 72 piastres in 1863, was the immediate cause of the rebellion in 1864. Although it was soon reduced to 27 piastres, it was augmented to 33 piastres in 1870, 40 piastres in 1871 and 47 1/4 piastres in 1872.⁴⁸ Amongst the Fraichiche tribes in 1885 the medjba charge was more than three times higher than taxes paid on the grain crops a reflection both of the weakness of crop yields and, perhaps, the onerousness of the poll tax:

Table 5.4 Taxes paid by Fractions of the Fraichiche in 1885

Tribe	Medjba	Achour
Ouled Ali	53,120	19,475
Ouled Nedji	48,280	15,800
Ouled Ouezzez	68,560	12,662
Ouled Sidi Tlil	19,320	4,000

Source: S.H.A.T., MR 1323, dossier 19 "Notice sur la Confederation des Fraichiche, le Village du Feriana et la Tribu de Ouled Sidi Tlil.

This was far from unusual in southern Tunisia due to the relatively low level of grain production. The tribe of Kooub and El Gouazine, paid only 2,000 piastres tax on their wheat production against a medjba of 45,640 piastres.⁴⁹ Amongst the Matmata tribes in the far south of the country one report estimated the medjba at well over half of the tribes' entire annual income (see Table 5.5).

Clearly this equilibrium between income and expenditure could not but be severely affected in the event of a failure of the olive and/or cereal crop in which case purchases of wheat and barley would increase(at higher prices) and the important revenues earned

⁴⁸ *Journal Officiel Tunisien*, "Notice sur la Tunisie", May 19, 1881, in MAE, Memoirs et Documents, Tunis 1880-1881.

⁴⁹ S.H.A.T., MR 1321, dossier 1, "Tribu des Kooub et El Gouazine.

from the sale of olive oil would be curtailed. With the medjba fixed, the only significant opportunity for raising income would be greater sales of animals (at lower prices) or the collection of alfa grass. In circumstances in which subsistence was a problem and given the need to find seed for sowing the upcoming crops, the requirement to pay the medjba was a prime motivator in the collection of alfa:

"n'y a-t-il que les indigents ou ceux qui sont presses pour le paiement des impots qui se livrent a ce genre d'industrie"⁵⁰

Table 5.5. Estimate of the Annual Income and Expenditure of the Matmata in 1886 (in piastres)

	Income		Expenses
Oil	52,024	Barley	14,536
Camels	10,640	Wheat	34,095
Horses	6,000	Medjba	67,500
Mules	2,250		
Oxen	5,000		
Sheep	8,640		
Goats	14,000		
Alfa	19,200		
Total	117,804	Total	116,131

Source : S.H.A.T., carton MR 1323, dossier 28, "Tribu des Matmata", April 19, 1886.

Many tribes simply could not find the wherewithal to pay these taxes when they fell due. Again in the Gafsa region, blighted by two successive years of drought followed by severe storms in 1890, much of the population had been unable to pay the current years taxes let alone those of the previous year.⁵¹ The population of the settlement

⁵⁰ S.H.A.T., Bureau de Renseignements, "Rapport sur le Neffet", 1885.

⁵¹ At Sened only 114 of the 233 men on the medjba register had paid the tax for 1888 while only 148 of 260 had done so at Djebel Aziz. At Mech the population still

of Mech was in a similar position:

"ne peuvent payer les impots et comptent sur la recolte de cette annee pour se liberer".⁵²

Likewise amongst the Ouled Aziz fraction of the Hammama tribe the French officer who toured the region reported that:

"les impots rentrent avec difficulte et ne pourront etre completement payes avant la prochaine recolte".⁵³

The accumulation of tax arrears obviously compromised the tribes ability to recover quickly from economic difficulties in subsequent years since payment was obligatory. In the Gafsa region at this time the numerous requests from the population for liberation from tax obligations fell on deaf ears.

In fact, although the French recognised the importance in reforming the old Beylical tax structures "qui ruinent l'agriculture et conduisant au depeuplement de la Regence", there was little immediate change in taxes during the early years of the Protectorate.⁵⁴ Having taken over a country deeply in debt, one which required considerable infrastructural investment both for political and economic reasons, and with the increased strains placed on its finances by the new administrative and military personnel installed by the French, there was an unwillingness to reduce the level of direct taxation of the population. Indeed initial efforts to change taxation focused on measures designed to permit a reduction in export duties rather than anything which would have

owed half the tax for 1888. None had managed to pay anything for 1889. AGT Serie A, carton 196, dossier 1, Report on the Situation...de Gafsa, *op. cit.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ AGT vol. 74, Cambon to Challemmal-Lacour, cited in Mahjoubi, A. (1977), p. 228.

directly alleviated the fiscal pressures on the native population.⁵⁵ Partly as a result the income from export duties fell from 3,120,000 piastres in 1881-1882 to 2,384,050 piastres in 1885-1886. Yet total government fiscal receipts increased during these years from 23,753,330 piastres to 34,200,276 piastres.⁵⁶ Part of this increase came from the more effective collection of direct and indirect taxes levied on the population.

Remarkably, despite the impoverishment of the whole south in 1888, the Administration pushed ahead with plans to submit all the southern tribes to regular taxation. By decree of July 29, 1888 the Ouerghamma tribes of the Akara, Khezour, Ouderna and Touazine were to pay taxes the first two the medjba the latter to the Driba, or collective tax, fixed at 64,000 piastres for the Ouderna and 100,000 piastres for the Touazine.⁵⁷ The military authorities in the south vehemently opposed the move believing the taxes an excessive burden on the population and viewing them as a potentially destabilizing influence in the delicate political cauldron of southern Tunisia. The Government, however, remained adamant and resolute that taxes had to be levied. In February 1889 the Governor of the Aradh, the region to the south of Gabes, was forced, under heavy and repeated pressure from the Director of Finances, to call on local officials to ensure the prompt return of taxes from the southern tribes.⁵⁸

Taxation tended to have a disproportionately heavy impact on the poorer tribesmen in the same way that during years of drought the loss of 4 animals out of a herd of 10 was, from a subsistence point of view, a much graver concern to a poor family than was a reduction of 40% of a wealthier family's livestock. The better off, or the well connected, often paid less taxes than the poor and illiterate of no social standing who

⁵⁵ In 1884 a decree was passed to abolish the taxes paid on agricultural produce on their entry into the towns and export duties on wheat, barley and vegetables were eliminated while duties paid on olive exports were reduced. Mahjoubi A. (1977) *op. cit.*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*.

⁵⁷ MAE, Correspondence Politique, *Rapport Mensuel*, July 1888.

⁵⁸ MAE, Correspondence Politique, *Rapport Mensuel*, February 1889.

could be ruthlessly exploited by the Caid and his staff.⁵⁹

In the Matmata mountains it was the Hamerna and the blacks (traditionally the lowest rank in tribal society) of the Rebenten tribe who exploited alfa most regularly.⁶⁰ The Hamerna which, like its neighbours the Hazem, Gheraira and Aleia, experienced difficulties year after year in surviving on the resources of their livestock and the oases they inhabited, one report commenting that 1886 was the fifth successive year without a grain crop due to lack of rainfall.⁶¹ To supplement meagre incomes some travelled each year to Tunis, or into the northern cereal growing regions to work as labourers while others with a little more wealth bought a few goods with which they set off exchanging for wheat and other products sometimes as far as Bone in Algeria. The opening by Perry Bury of a little alfa yard at Zarat brought a new source of income to the inhabitants and even offered some members of the Aleia the opportunity of regular labour in preparing and handling the alfa brought to the yard before it was shipped to Gabes or Sfax for export.

5.7 Conclusion

The arid and semi-arid environments of south and central Tunisia provided the inhabitants of these regions little in the way of economic security and stability. Climate, and especially rainfall, played an inordinate role in determining the prosperity of the tribes, all their resources being intimately linked to the timing, distribution and level of rainfall. Extensive pastoralism was the only truly viable economic activity for the bulk of the population. Although of secondary importance to livestock, agricultural and horticultural production was a vital source of nourishment for the tribes as it was

⁵⁹ The inequality of the tax burden is evident elsewhere in the country. In the oases of the Djerid, for example, Henia demonstrates that landowners crippled with debts commonly resorted to signing contracts with wealthier inhabitants in which the former, in exchange for immediate, and often derisory, income, accepted the latter's own tax obligations in perpetuity. See Henia, A. (1985), *op. cit.*.

⁶⁰ S.H.A.T., carton MR 1323, dossier 15, "Notice sur les Tribus des Hamerna, des Hazem et Aleia".

⁶¹ *Ibid.*.

also an important means of exchange for other products. While the tribes sowed whatever land their resources would permit, the grain crop was particularly sensitive to, and dependent on, climatic conditions and harvests were generally highly irregular and low yielding. Years of good harvests were far outweighed by those of mediocre ones or of total crop failures and the south in general was perpetually deficient in cereals for its subsistence requirements. The northern provinces, the Tell, provided the tribes a vital source of pasture and of work during periods of low rainfall in the south and was a fundamental mechanism by which some form of equilibrium was maintained amongst the pastoral nomads.

But drought conditions were a constant threat and during such years, or after successive years of highly unfavourable rainfall in the south, subsistence problems for the tribes could become severe. This could be further complicated when drought also affected the north, thus limiting both the availability of pasture for southern tribes and reducing the offer of work in the harvests there. The tribes had little left to fall back on except the sale of some of the animals which survived. Prices for livestock and animal products inevitably fell precipitously under these conditions while the cost of purchasing grain rose considerably. The effects of famine, often compounded by virulent disease, had a devastating impact on both the human and animal populations of Tunisia.

The development of the trade in alfa grass brought a precious, and much needed, source of income to the tribes of southern Tunisia. Although widely perceived as being an almost humiliating activity the collection of alfa provided all the tribes a means of procuring, albeit meagre, resources under conditions of extreme economic duress. A naturally self perpetuating resource, alfa grass became, after the establishment of the trade in the material with Britain, the only significant and dependable economic resource available to the southern tribes in years of severe and widespread drought and saved many from starvation:

"Of so incalculable benefit has it been to the natives as to render them almost independent of the corn crops, the failure of which formerly entailed great want and misery, if it did not cause a famine. The consequent increase which has taken place in the rate of wages has attracted many Arabs and blacks to the localities where it is pressed and prepared for export, who are thus able to earn an ample livelihood in return for their work. The development of this trade has indirectly affected all other trades and industries. Many Christian and Mohammedan artisans who formerly could scarcely find employment now carry on a thriving business. Altogether esparto has been a great boon to the Arabs and an advantage to European residents".⁶²

For the mainly Maltese and Jewish brokers, and the trading houses which employed them, the alfa trade also brought a significant new source of income, particularly important when other branches of commerce, almost entirely agriculturally based, were in suffering from the effects of drought. The financially bankrupt Beylical government equally benefitted considerably from the alfa trade not only directly from the tax levied on the export of the material which helped reduce the shortfall caused by lower export duties raised from the country's other natural products, but also by enabling the recovery of taxes from the population of the interior (see Chapter 7).

Government taxation of the tribes had a material influence on the economic well being of the tribes in the nineteenth century and was an important motivation for tribal participation in the alfa trade even in years of favourable climatic and environmental conditions. Many tribes resorted to the sale of alfa simply to pay taxes owing to the government. The extension and more effective extraction of taxes under the French administration proved a stimulus to the collection of alfa amongst the poorest tribes for many of which the income generated from its sale became a regular and constant necessity.

One report from the Bureau de Renseignements indicates that for some tribes the collection of alfa grass had to some extent replaced the need for cereal production:

⁶² British Parliamentary Papers (1878), LXXIV, *Report by Consul General Drummond Hay on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1877*.

"La culture etait autrefois beaucoup plus prospere qui aujourd'hui, elle tend a diminuer encore, notammenet chez les Ouled Amran; il faut en chercher la cause dans l'exploitation de l'halfa. Cette plante existe en effet sur le territoire en tres grande quantite et constitue pour les Madjers une source de benefices faciles. L'on comprend donc aisement etant donnee surtout le caractere naturellement parraseux de l'arabe qu'il abandonne le penible travail des champs pour une exploitation tout a la fois moins fatigant, plus lucrataive et d'un profit plus assure".⁶³

We believe this view is entirely erroneous and, even if true of the particular time when the study was undertaken, could have been nothing but an aberration. The collection of alfa grass was almost entirely a reflection of poverty and need and was never a permanent alternative to either animal rearing or other agricultural activities.

The level of alfa exports achieved during the nineteenth century is testament to the degree of economic distress endured by many tribes whether caused by environmental factors or fiscal pressure. Almost uniquely amongst the natural resources of southern Tunisia alfa grass could be relied upon at all times by those lacking alternative means of subsistence or of paying taxes.

⁶³ S.H.A.T., MR 1321, dossier 24, Tribu des Madger.



Chapter Six

The Alfa Trade 1881-1887

6.1 Reaction to the Occupation in the South

Until the signing of the Treaty of the Bardo in May of 1881 military activity had been exclusively concentrated in the north of the country. Elsewhere the population remained relatively calm, encouraging the French to cut their occupying forces by two-thirds to 10,000 men.¹ Almost immediately after this action, however, resistance to the French occupation began to increase again in the north and, more seriously, to spread amongst the semi-nomads of the south and centre of the country as news of the invasion filtered through with the arrival of tribes from the north fleeing the French advance. Attacks on the sedentary populations of the Sahel which refused to become involved in any opposition to the French forces increased markedly. At Susa it was reported that a group of Hammama tribesmen delivering alfa grass to Perry Bury's yard ran off crying "let us fight the French and gain Heaven".²

By early June, amidst rumours of an imminent French attack on the holy town of Kairouan and on Sfax, the revolt against both Europeans and Beylical officials, who were regarded as conspirators in the French invasion, became widespread amongst the nomads. Many refused to pay their taxes or recognise their caids.³ Meetings of different tribes were held to discuss the situation and decide their response. The growing insurrection centred on Sfax where the tribes found ready support from the Arab citizens of the town. The spark which ignited their pent up anger was the arrival of a French ship "Le Chacal" at Sfax on June 26. The Arabs reacted by attacking the European population forcing many to embark on the Chacal to escape. It was after this episode that anti-French sentiment broke out into open revolt. Fractions of the

¹ Arnoulet, F. (1984) p. 108.

² FO 335/151/1, Galea to Reade, June 26, 1881.

³ Karoui and Mahjoubi cite the case of the Methalith tribe near Sfax which demanded a new Caid. The authorities in Tunis acceded but his replacement never took office. Rejected by the tribe he returned to Tunis. Karoui, M. and A. Mahjoubi (1983) p. 98.

Hammama, Zlass and Beni-Zid tribes arrived at Sfax to join the war against the infidels. After the Chacal incident there emerged a leader, Ali ben Khalifa, Caid of the Neffet tribe, who was to unite the tribes against the French and the government.⁴

The French response to the Chacal incident was swift. The naval bombardment of the town began on the fifth of July with 6000 soldiers troops being landed on the sixteenth.⁵ The town was quickly taken and order restored.

But the defeat at Sfax merely served to intensify the struggle against the French. Almost all the tribes of the south and centre of the country were now involved in a full scale rebellion. The Ouerghemma moved north to join the Hammama, Zlass, Neffet and Fraichiche in the Sahel and around Kairouan destroying property and attacking government troops and the local sedentary population.

The scale of the uprising entrained the French authorities to organise a second military expedition in the country from October 1881. Three columns of troops were constituted each of which was to cross different parts of the country to join up at Kairouan, where occupation was achieved without a struggle. From Kairouan the French troops moved south towards Kasserine, Gafsa, the Djerid, Gabes and Zarziz, pushing the insurgents further and further south and finally into refuge in Tripoli. Martel estimates the number of Tunisians in Tripolitania at between 120,000 and 140,000.⁶ Almost all were from the tribes of the south and centre of the country, few of which did not have at least some of their number refuged in the neighbouring Wilayet.

⁴ Until the Chacal incident ben Khalifa continued to be loyal to the government exhorting the Arabs to stay calm and not to become involved in any unrest. The reasons for his rapid, and complete, change of heart are unknown. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵ Ayadi, T. (1981) p. 178.

⁶ Martel, A. (1865) p. 290.

6.2 The Alfa Trade During and Immediately after the Occupation

The alfa trade in Tunis was seriously disrupted by the French occupation and its aftermath amongst the tribes of the south and centre. Perry Bury's yard at Sfax was completely destroyed in the struggle for the town and their properties at Skhira and Gourine plundered.⁷ Considerable advances made to the tribes prior to the uprising were lost. More importantly the flight of much of the tribal population into Tripolitania severely reduced the potential for collections. In 1882 exports fell by more than 60% from the previous year to only 12,697 tons while the following year only 12,593 tons were exported.⁸

But quite apart from the upheaval caused by the invasion, two other factors threatened the prosperity of the trade in Tunis during the 1880's. The first was the creation of a large private concession of alfa exploitation rights to a single company. The second, and in the long term more serious, was the sharp fall in world alfa prices from the middle of the decade.

6.3 The Duplessis Concession

Early in 1881 a retired French army captain and holder of the Legion d'Honneur, M. Rene Duplessis, managed to extract from the Prime Minister of Tunis, with the forceful backing of the French consul, a contract which surrendered to him for a period of 99 years the sole rights to the exploitation of alfa grass growing over a large, but ill-defined, extent of land in the mountains of the Ouerghemma, El Ayacha, Madjoura, Bou Hedma and Heddedj. The concession, the first of its kind in Tunis and, unlike similar arrangements in Spain and Algeria, at no cost whatsoever to the incumbent, was ratified by Beylical decree on June 13, 1881 just one month after the signing of the Treaty of the Bardo.

The reaction to the news amongst the alfa traders in Tunis, was one of great dismay.

⁷ FO 335/152/2 Balzan to Reade, November 5, 1881 and FO 335/151 anon., June 26, 1881.

⁸ British Parliamentary Papers (1888) XCIX, Report on The Trade of Tunis for the Year 1887.

The mountains concerned were some of the most productive sources of alfa in the country and supplied the major part of the country's alfa exports. Many felt that the Bey, in granting a concession of these district, had effectively created a monopoly control over the country's alfa resources to the detriment of all.

British paper producers in Britain were also greatly concerned about the concession. Already suffering from price increases in alfa grass resulting from the Bou Amra tribal rebellion in Algeria and the tribal uprising against the French occupation of Tunis, they were fearful lest the elimination of competition in the Regency might work to push prices up still further. They were also anxious that an important source of grass for the British market should not fall into the hands of their French competitors. The British Papermakers Association wrote to Lord Granville warning that:

"...among the projects which have received the official support of the French Consul General in Tunis, M. Roustan, is one for creating a monopoly of all the Esparto Grass in the Regency, with the view of entirely diverting the trade from British merchants, in whose hand it has almost exclusively been up to the present time. Since the disturbances in Tunis and northern Africa, the trade in esparto which now forms the most important material for the manufacture of paper, has almost completely ceased, and should the trade, on restoration of order, be impeded by the imposition of arbitrary export duties, the manufacturers and consumers of paper in this country will materially suffer".⁹

Britain's Consul General, Reade, was acutely aware of the trade's importance to British interests in Tunis itself. In 1881 shipments of alfa were valued at some £250,000, accounting for a large percentage of Britain's exports from the country and employing a considerable number of British merchants. Coming so soon after the French invasion Reade saw the decision to grant the concession to Duplessis as nothing more nor less than a French inspired conspiracy designed to undermine British influence at the Beylical palace. In his response to a Foreign Office request for further information on the matter, Reade wrote:

⁹ FO 102/157, The Papermakers Association to Lord Granville, London, November 16, 1881.

"I need hardly say that this extraordinary transaction will act very prejudicially on our commercial interests in this country and is regarded here as a blow especially directed at one of the most important items of the British export trade of Tunis".¹⁰

The French Resident General, Roustan, repeatedly denied the accusations either that the concession constituted a monopoly or that it was directly aimed at disrupting British trade. In reply to Perry Bury's fears in this regard, communicated to him through Reade, Roustan was adamant that "...il n'a ete concede aucun monopole de la nature susmentione".¹¹ Yet the widely held view that the Tunisian government, pressed by French authorities, was actively engaged in compromising British interests in the Regency received further credence in March of 1882 when the British firm of Surtees, Hough and Law were refused a concession, on similar terms to that given to Duplessis, of alfa growing in fourteen different and distinct areas of the south:

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Sbeitla | 8. Matmata |
| 2. Zlass | 9. Bneselten |
| 3. Shereesh (Zarzis) | 10. Beniaiscia |
| 4. Jbel Huaia (Haouia) | 11. Skhira |
| 5. Bni Zid | 12. Aiseia |
| 6. Figuia | 13. Green |
| 7. Jbel Zraua | 14. Zarat |
- "... and any such other districts as it may please your Highness".¹²

Although such a view was understandable given the general political and economic climate prevailing in Tunis in the aftermath of the French occupation, there was, in fact, no French conspiracy of the type claimed by British critics of the concession. French influence had indeed been brought to bear on the Tunisian government to "encourage" it to block the British firm's request, but this pressure had not been motivated by any misplaced sense of national pride or nationalistic prejudice. Indeed,

¹⁰ FO 102/157, Reade to Granville, Tunis, March 2, 1882.

¹¹ FO 335/156/1, Roustan to Reade, Tunis, February 13, 1882.

¹² FO 335/136/4, Hough to the Prime Minister of Tunis, no date, enclosed in a letter from Alfred Mattei to Reade, March 25, 1882. It is worth noting here that Hough was able to list 14 districts which he believed lay outwith the existing Duplessis concession since some year later, after he had taken over the rights to that concession (see below), he was to claim that many of these districts did indeed fall within the boundaries of the concession.

were it not for the fact that the Duplessis agreement had been agreed before the French invasion and that, under the terms of the Treaty of the Bardo the Bey's sovereignty remained intact (the French military presence was officially described as a measure of support for the Tunisian government's struggle to control unruly elements of the population), the Resident General would have had it revoked immediately. While legally bound to uphold the Duplessis contract and accept it as a *fait accompli*, he could, and did, prevent any further such concessions of a similar nature. This reflects a deep, and growing, concern felt by both French civil and military authorities in the country over the threat which such concessions posed not only to the immediate, and extremely delicate, relations with the turbulent southern tribes but also, and more importantly, to the long term stability of the south on the eventual repatriation of the tribes to their lands. Furthermore, the south of Tunis was strategically vital to the French government in Algeria where the current Bou Amra rebellion was merely one in a constant tide of civil unrest in the country which many believed was propagated by support from Tunisian tribes which directed a large flow of guns and ammunition, landed clandestinely along the southern coast of the Regence, to Algeria. Prolonged unrest along the border could only serve to heighten tensions within Algeria.

It should be remembered that the French consular officials had vigorously supported Duplessis's application for the concession largely with the aim of strengthening French influence in the country. This, of course, was standard French policy designed to enhance her claim to be the only Power whose interests warranted political aggrandisement, if not outright political annexation. Yet the original, perhaps ostensible, plan of limited intervention was already giving way to thoughts of more formal control, a move only supported by the need for greater military involvement to combat mounting unrest in the south. The tribal uprising presented the French force with a major problem particularly given the stipulation by the government in Paris that the establishment of a Protectorate should not place any strain on metropolitan resources.¹³ Furthermore, public opinion at home dictated that there could be no question of a prolonged military campaign to pacify the country, or a large army of

¹³ Mahjoub Ali, (1977) p. 57.

occupation, as had occurred in Algeria.

Yet the operation of the concession could only serve to heighten anti-French feeling amongst precisely that part of the population whose reaction to the French intervention had been the strongest. This was because the concession struck at the very heart of one of the most fundamental underpinnings of tribal society: the collective "ownership" of culturally and historically defined areas of land by individual tribal units. In signing over the rights to the exploitation of the alfa resources growing on tribal land, the Bey had unilaterally usurped the tribes' hitherto unchallenged and previously inalienable rights of ownership, presaging thereby, even if only symbolically in the first instance, the forced and effective political domination of the semi-nomadic populations by the central authority.

In the long term such an outcome was clearly in the French interest since not only would it ensure the full incorporation of the south into the political structures of the country as a whole, but would also give them pre-emptive rights for future colonisation of the land. Hence Roustan's claim, in reasserting that a monopoly of alfa collection had not been created, that, "...par cet acte, le gouvernement [of the bey] a simplement depose a titre du seul et legitime proprietaire des produits de terrains qui lui appartiennent".¹⁴

William Galea, Perry Bury's principal north African representative and by now also Britain's Vice-Consul at Susa, was quick to counter this, however, pointing out in a letter to Reade, that:

"At present esparto is bought from individual Arabs, each tribe gathers the esparto in its respective mountains, and sells it in the market, and no merchant has ever hired a mountain for his own exclusive account. I consider that when this concession will be known to the Arabs it will be a serious matter as they will find themselves no longer proprietors of ground and mountains which they have considered for generations their own".¹⁵

¹⁴ FO 335 156/1 Roustan to M. l'Agent et Consul General Reade, Tunis, March 20, 1882.

¹⁵ FO 335 155/1 Galea to Reade, Susa, April 15, 1882.

It did not require Galea's intimate knowledge of the tribes to understand this point.

The French authorities' ability to maintain this position was based largely on an almost complete lack of knowledge of the true extent of the concession which had been only vaguely referred to in the contract. The French authorities, as ignorant as everyone in this respect, were happy, for the time being, to exploit the public confusion which surrounded the deal, particularly as Duplessis himself had made no move in the intervening period which could have been construed as indicating an interest in capitalising on his good fortune. As long as this apparent indecision on the part of the concessionnaire prevailed there was little to threaten Roustan's position. Yet matters were already beginning to get beyond the French authorities' control.

Duplessis, it seems, never had any intention of entering the commerce in alfa grass. For him, as with many of his French contemporaries, Tunis was a country eminently suited to speculative business ventures, especially in land. His contract with the Tunisian government was considerably more attractive than most in that it had cost him precisely nothing. Furthermore, with demand for alfa fibre continuing at high levels (it was by far the most common raw material used in the manufacture of paper in the UK) and with difficulties of supply creating major problems for British consumers, the concession of some of the most productive alfa lands in Tunis offered a lucrative potential to anyone with the will and expertise to exploit them.

Duplessis' opportunism was to pay off handsomely. Surtees, Hough and Law, aggrieved but not disheartened by the bey's reaction to their own proposals, entered into negotiations with Duplessis for the transferral of his contract to them. Talks progressed swiftly and on April 6, 1882, agreement was reached in principle, whereby Duplessis would cede his rights in their entirety to the British firm on condition that it should set up a new company to manage the concession. In return, the Frenchman was reported to have received a guarantee of 35% of net profits arising from the working of the concession.¹⁶

¹⁶ AGT E 233/10 Alfa, Tribunale Arbitrale, March 5, 1884.

It is possible the French were unaware of this new deal although their silence on the subject may have reflected a desire to keep news regarding the concessions as secret as possible. Speculation in Tunis, however, was rife. On hearing of the unconfirmed reports regarding the deal with the British firm, the Foreign Office instructed Reade to withdraw, instituting further pressure on the Bey for the abolition of the contract. London was less concerned with the idea of a concession, on whatever scale, as it was with the prospect of French control over what had become an important source of raw material for Britain's paper manufacturing industry. It did nothing however, to appease the large and varied groups of merchants and brokers and their personnel operating in Tunis itself for whom the trade in alfa grass was a significant business commodity.

With little information available from British sources, and none forthcoming from either the Tunisian government or French officials, alfa traders were living off a diet of rumour and counter-rumour. It was to try and find out more about the concession that a partner in the firm Perry Bury, Mr James Doughane, was dispatched from Liverpool to Tunis from where he was to travel to Tripoli for talks with some of the Arab insurgents who had fled the alfa regions of Tunis for the sanctuary of Tripoli. Doughane arrived at Susa on the 21st of April, 1882 where he was met by Galea and the two men left for Tripoli by steamer.

On arrival they had little difficulty in arranging meetings with many of the refugees, including their leader, Ali ben Hlifa. The intelligence they gathered from their many discussions was profoundly disturbing to them, as it was to the French whose worst fears appeared to be realised:

"I had a good deal of conversation with the different classes of Tunisian insurgents at Tripoli, and I observed that the lower classes are tired of remaining there...but the higher class is...continually persuading them that the Sultan is strengthening himself and after-wards will fight the French; this all comes from Ali Bunhlifa".¹⁷

With regards the concession itself, the news was bleak for the Tunisian alfa traders.

¹⁷ FO 335 155/1 Galea to Reade, Susa, May 11, 1882.

Galea and Doughane discovered that while only five mountains were mentioned in the concession, the contract apparently gave to Duplessis the rights to collect alfa grass on five chains of mountains, comprising in total over sixty mountains, giving him therefore, a veritable monopoly in the trade from the Tripoli frontier to a point well north of Sfax.¹⁸

More disturbing for the French was the news that:

"The revolutionaries are aware of the concession and their revolutionary feelings are stronger than ever and they assert that the Bey not only sold them to the French, but has also sold their homes and property".¹⁹

By this time the French had already received similar information from the country's Consul at Tripoli in the form of a report which stated:

"On nous a rapporte depuis deux mois environs...que tout le territoire compris depuis les montagnes derrieres Sfax jusqu'aux celles des Ouerghemas au sud de Zerzis, c'est a dire un espace que ne comprend pas moins d'une semaine du marche a cheval a ete donne en concession pour 99 ans a une francais du nom de Blazi [Duplessis] qui a desormais le monopole exclusif de l'exploitation de l'alfa. Voyez sur le cart le nombre de tribus, de villages, de campements, de jardins, de cultures constant sur cette territoire peuple d'au moins 150,000 habitants, l'alfa servit de paturages a leurs bestiaux et elle etait aussi une grande resource comme matiere a recolter et a vendre aux marchands europeens du littoral on leur a assure que a l'avenir le concessionnaire aura seul le droit d'en déposer, des lors plus de terrains de parcours pour les troupeaux, plus de commerce de l'alfa. Mourir de faim chez nous ou en Tripolitaine, mieux vaut rester ici independents et attendre des evenements puisqu'on nous promet le secours du sultan pour rentrer en possession de nos droits traditionnels dont on a dispose contre notre gre".²⁰

Roustan now found his position seriously compromised. The vagueness in the wording of the contract which had hitherto been the great strength of the French's persistent

¹⁸ FO 102/157 Perry Bury to Sir Charles Dilke, HM's Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Liverpool, May 23, 1882.

¹⁹ FO 335 155/1 Galea to Reade, May 11, 1882.

²⁰ First Annex to Despatch of December 21, 1885. Direction Politique no. 337, Correspondance Politique, No. 88. Extract of a letter from M. Feraud to Ambassador of the Republique of France in Constantinople, Tripoli, May 29, 1882.

assurances that a monopoly had not been created, now became a major liability, for it was now clear that it was not the French who determined the exact extent of the concession; rather it was ultimately dependent on the interpretation of the concessionnaire. This was of lesser significance as long as Duplessis showed no desire to become actively engaged in working the concession but now, with the arrival of the British firm who exhibited every intent to actively exploit it, it became a more serious problem. The company, after all, was unlikely to interpret it in any way unfavourable to its commercial interests.

Moreover, the French authorities were now fully aware of the tribal opposition to the concession and preoccupied with the likely repercussions on their attempts to encourage their peaceful return. Of particular concern was the region bordering Tripolitania which for centuries had been the source of constant disputes and unrest centring on deep seated antagonisms between the Tunisian tribes of the Ourghemma confederation and those in Tripolitania, notably the Nouail.

Security in this region was vital to the French not only because its continued resistance was expensive in terms of money and personnel, but also because it was a major source of contraband of arms for the tribes of southern Algeria. With limited resources, security in the south would depend on an alliance with part of the population, and the Ouerghemma tribes were the most powerful of the area and the most strategically located:

"Il est evident qu'avec le concours de cette puissante tribu, on pourrait exercer une surveillance efficace sur toute la partie occidentale de la frontiere tripolitaine, que s'etende de la mer a Ghadames et empeche ainsi la contrabande de guerre qui s'y fait continuellement au detriment de la prosperite et de la securite de l'Algerie et de la Tunisie..."²¹

At the same time as keeping the arms trade in check, effective control of the region was important for the re-establishment of the caravan trade with the interior of Africa which remained a goal of the French:

²¹ Memoires et Documents, Dossier 4, Min. de la Guerre a M. le Minister des Affaires Etrangeres, Paris, September 19, 1881.

"Cette securite des parcours donnerait une importance considerable a un grand marche permanent qui serait etabli a Ouargla et dont M. Feraud demande, avec raison, la creation pour aggrandir notre commerce avec le Soudan au detriment de Tripoli".²²

But with the Ouerghemma tribes in open rebellion from March 1882,²³ the French were forced to revise their stance on the issue of the concession. The complacency which had hitherto characterised their policy on this matter now gave way to insistent efforts to find a way of ameliorating the more onerous terms, and potentially most damaging consequences of the contract.

It was not long before a convenient legal loophole was discovered in the contract. It appeared that no decision which directly affected the management of the Revenues Conceded could be executed without the prior approval of the International Financial Commission. As the revenues from the export tax on alfa grass came under the Commission's jurisdiction the contract should have been submitted to it for ratification. This had not been done and the Resident General was thereby provided with the opportunity of modifying the agreement.

Neither Duplessis nor Surtees, Hough and Law were at all happy about this move, since the contract had been legally ratified under the terms of the Beylical decree, now almost one year old. Nevertheless such was the French opposition to the deal that a compromise was reached whereby any new arrangement would be made without prejudice to the concessionnaire's rights under the original contract.

The most important clause incorporated into the modified Beylical decree of June 14, 1882 was the exclusion of the Ouerghemma mountains. The region's contribution to the alfa trade, relative to that of the other areas, was anyway limited and was not a significant loss to the economic potential of the concession. The four other main clauses which the French insisted on including in the new agreement were as follows:

²² *Ibid.*.

²³ Karoui and Mahjoubé (1983) p. 183.

1. A delimitation of the remaining districts had to be made by competent agents appointed and approved by the Tunisian government.
2. In order to minimise tribal hostility to the concession traditional rights of pasture and usage of the local populations had to be fully respected.
3. At least 10,000 tons of grass per annum would have to be exported by the company for the first three consecutive years of operation. This was designed to ensure stability of tax revenue collected from alfa exports which was an important source of income for the Government.
4. The newly created French Tribunal alone was to mediate and arbitrate in any cases of litigation arising from the concession.

These, and other minor alterations, were accepted by all parties directly concerned and on the 20th of September 1882, the rights of the concession were transferred to the newly created Franco-English-Tunisian Esparto Fibre Supply Company Limited [hereafter referred to as the Franco-English Company].²⁴

The little port of Skhira was chosen as the site of the firm's esparto yard and was to form the centre of its operations in Tunis. Lying some fifty miles south of Sfax, Skhira had previously only been used by alfa merchants as a shipping station principally because no customs post existed in the town. Nevertheless, as Galea readily admitted, it was an ideal location for an alfa centre with one of the deepest and most sheltered anchorages on the southern coast. The concession provided for the loading of alfa at Skhira for direct transportation to the UK.

The firm's establishment at Skhira, and its attempts to forge business links with the surrounding population, provide us with a clear example of the degree of social and economic disequilibrium of tribal Tunisia and the methods by which European traders were able to exploit this.

6.4 The Mehedba tribe

The company's initial attempts to arrange for the collection of grass by local

²⁴ FO 335/1 R. Watson Surtees to Granville, London, January 7, 1884.

populations centred on the Mehedba tribe inhabiting the region around Skhira, including Bou-Hedma Mountain. The Mehedba tribe had taken part in the rebellion against French forces in large numbers and a considerable number were still in Tripoli. Though their hostility indicated a virulent anti-French sentiment, deeply held and strongly displayed, it was undoubtedly also a reflection of serious economic problems which had beset the tribe for many years. The need to pay taxes to the bey weighed heavily on their meagre resources and the tribe as a whole had been having great difficulties in meeting these obligations.²⁵

In order to make these payments, many had contracted extensive debts with European merchants in Sfax. These were collective in nature and were guaranteed by the sheikhs and notables of the tribe. The large scale emigration to Tripoli manifests, in part, a desire to rid themselves of the vicious circle of debt and debt repayment in a desperate attempt to halt a continuous downward spiral to destitution. Yet refuge in Tripoli did not divest them of their responsibilities to their various creditors. At some point they would have to return and, by the middle of 1882, there seemed little prospect of a French military defeat.

On their return the tribe was to be faced with payment of these debts and with their on-going fiscal obligations unchanged. During the early years of the Protectorate the tax regime was little altered and continued to weigh most heavily on the poorest sections of society. The mejba, or capitation tax, which was not paid by the citizens of Tunis, Kairouan, Sousse, Sfax and Monastir, was still exacted from the tribes and had to be remitted irrespective of the size of the harvest. The other main taxes, the achour on cereals and the kanoun on olives, even rose slightly under the French between 1883 and 1886.²⁶

Although the French wanted to lower the tax burden on the country in general, seeing it as a hindrance to economic development, they found themselves unable to do so

²⁵ S.H.A.T., carton MR 1323, Report no. 17, Tribu des Mehedba, August 10, 1885.

²⁶ Mahjoubi, A. (1977) p. 230.

because of the need to ensure stable income for the Treasury. As d'Estournelles de Constant pointed out,

"Comment payer les dépenses, si réduites fussent-elles, et la dette que nous garantissons, si sous prétexte d'en améliorer le régime (des impôts), nous commençons par supprimer le peu de recettes qu'on pouvait tirer du pays".²⁷

Furthermore the abuses in the collection of taxes by the government's representatives, the Caid and their subordinates the Khalifa and Sheikhs, continued largely unchecked throughout the decade of the 1880's.

Alfa grass provided the tribe with virtually the only means to acquit themselves of their debts and in many cases, the debts had been taken over in their entirety by alfa merchants to be repaid fully in alfa grass:

"...les obligations des Mehedbas envers le commerce ont toute la même origine: cette tribu pauvre éprouvant chaque année des difficultés pour acquitter le montant des impôts; des maisons se livraient au trafic de l'alfa leur faisaient alors des avances remboursables en alfa à un taux déterminé".²⁸

Given that these debts were collective in nature, a key factor in establishing favourable commercial transactions with the tribes would be the support of the caid, in this case Noury Ben Belgacem. The caid, of course, had a vested interest in involving his tribe in the alfa trade, since much of his income rested on their economic prosperity and in particular, on the tribes ability to pay its dues to the government of which the Caid retained 10%. He also collected the taxes paid on alfa exports at the port of Skhira and clearly had an interest in maximising trade.²⁹

But Noury also had a more personal reason for welcoming the Franco-English Company. He himself had incurred substantial debts, including one for 7,825 piastres with two Sfax merchants, Paolo Camilleri and Guiseppe Farrugia. For this sum he

²⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 229.

²⁸ S.H.A.T., carton MR 1323, Report no. 17, Tribu des Mehedba, August 10, 1885.

²⁹ This however was transferred to Gabes in 1884 at the request of General Allegro.

had mortgaged his share of a house at Skhira and a garden in Sfax belonging in equal halves to himself and the Italian merchant, Salvatore Giardina. When the debt fell due, the creditors instituted legal proceedings for the sale of the properties. At this point William Galea, acting on behalf of Perry Bury which already traded from the port, intervened with the aim of reinforcing obligations for the collection of alfa to his company. Galea liquidated Noury's debt with his creditors, receiving in return the title deeds to the properties concerned. In the mean-time however, the rebellion intervened and the trade in alfa at the port, as elsewhere, all but stopped.

With the purchase of the Duplessis concession in April 1882, the Franco-English Company instructed Alfred Mattei, a Tunisian lawyer resident in London, to go to Tunis with the aim of purchasing such land and property as was necessary to begin operations in the country. Mattei first purchased Giardina's share of the house at Skhira and then bought Noury's, paying him the 7,825 piastres with which he could free his debt with Galea. In effect the Caid was transferring his allegiance to the Company which had been awarded the concession. Having the Caid of the Mehedba as a "satellite" would be of great value in future dealings with the tribe.

On the day of Mattei's arrival at Skhira, Noury sent messengers to all the sheikhs and notables of the tribe and the following morning, the 7th of May, he handed Mattei, in their presence, the possession of the property, "...the religious prayer having been said and the ceremony performed by the ecclesiastical dignitaries present".³⁰

Having explained the purport of the concession and the object of the Franco-English Company to those present, Mattei "was assured by the Arabs of their friendly disposition and their willingness to work the alfa in conjunction with the Company".³¹ It could hardly be otherwise and the Company immediately set about exploiting its position with regards the Mehedba tribe.

³⁰ FO 335 155/1 Mattei to Reade, Tripoli, June 12, 1882.

³¹ *Ibid.*.

In November of the same year, following the creation of the Franco-English Company, Hough arrived in Tunis to arrange for the delimitation of the four mountains. The journey from Sfax to Skhira, which took three days, was undertaken with a military escort of 120 soldiers and a train of 200 camels laden with supplies, some of which were intended as an inducement to members of the Mehedba tribe still in exile, to return.³²

While approval of the delimitation by the government was awaited, the firm sought to publicise their venture in Britain among consumers and investors alike. At a meeting of papermakers and other interested parties in Manchester on the 17th of January 1883, Mattei claimed that from the Bou-Hedma Mountain alone, some "30,000 tons of esparto grass could be exported annually".³³ Moreover, the Company was confident that a tramway could be laid from Bou-Hedma to Skhira which would ensure, together with hydraulic presses, that the grass could be delivered in Liverpool for £3 8s per ton as against £7 5s, the price reigning in 1882.³⁴

In accordance with the June 14 decree of 1882, the Company's exclusive rights to exploit the alfa in the mountains prescribed by the contract, would only commence after their delimitation and the publicly announced ratification by beylical decree. The first of these mountains, Bou-Hedma, already the largest supplier of alfa grass in the Tunisian market, was sanctioned by decree of the 13th of August, 1883.³⁵

6.5 The Railway

The approval of the other three mountains, however, was to prove more problematical. The major stumbling block was the railway, regarded by the Franco-English Company as an essential element in their business strategy. Article I of the original contract

³² AGT E 233/10 Governor of the Mehedba to the Prime Minister, November 1882.

³³ *The Times*, "Esparto Fibre for Paper Making," Wednesday, January 17, 1883, p. 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Journal Officiel Tunisien*, September 6, 1883, p. 2.

empowered Duplessis to construct either a railway or a tramway from the districts conceded to Skhira on the condition that it was used solely for the transportation of grass. However, when the concession was put forward for modification, the French authorities were preoccupied with the problem of security in the south and the expense which effective policing would involve. Limited resources dictated that French policy would concentrate on deploying troops at specific, geographically strategic locations in the south, mainly the larger towns.

These garrisons, however, were isolated, difficult to provision and costly to maintain. A railway network passing through these regions and linked to the coast and to Algeria, would enable the French to retain a small military presence in the south, yet also ensure that reinforcements and supplies could be quickly brought in should the need arise. A priority, therefore was a railway linking the strategically vital Gafsa with the coast and with the Algerian rail network.

Clearly the expense involved in such a project would be enormous and place a serious strain on the country's Treasury. The Resident General, therefore, sought to evaluate the possibility of defraying some of the costs by using the planned line from Bou-Hedma and extending it to Gafsa and beyond. Thus Article 2 of the modified contract omitted the option to the concessionnaire of a tramway while retaining the word "railway," stipulating that:

"...the Government reserves to itself the right of demanding the establishment of a public sequence of passengers and goods traffic on the line already constructed...when after due enquiry, its necessity shall be ascertained".³⁶

Thus when in February, 1883 the Company proposed plans for the construction of a light railway, or tramway, considered sufficient for its needs, the Resident General refused unless the firm agreed to a wider gauge and greater load-carrying capacity³⁷ to ensure compatibility with the Algerian railways.

³⁶ FO 335 160/1 Surtees to HM's Consul at Tunis, October 27, 188_.

³⁷ MAE Correspondance Politique, vol. 88, 1885.

6.6 Trading Problems for the Franco-English Company

While the litigation over the railway dragged on, during which time the ratification of the delineation of the remaining districts provided for by the concession was withheld, the trading performance of the Franco-English Company was extremely poor. The firm's exports in 1883 amounted to a mere 3,222 tons of alfa grass, well short of both its own projections and the stipulated minimum to satisfy the terms of the contract.³⁸

Deprived of the exclusive rights to the production on the other mountains, the Company soon resorted to ruthlessly exploitative measures on Bou-Hedma in an attempt to increase collections and at the same time reduce expenses to a minimum. In April, 1884 the Caid of the Mehedba complained to the prime minister that the Company paid his people only four piastres for each Tunisian quintal of grass taken to its yard at Skhira, while the Hammama tribesmen, who remained outwith the delimited territories, received between seven and eight piastres per quintal.³⁹

At the same time the French were receiving complaints from various of those with whom the Franco-English company were trading regarding problems for the payment of grass delivered.

"On pretende que la compagnie Franco-Anglaise qui exploite le massif de Bou-Hedma, donne lieu a des plaintes au sujet des retards qu'elle apporte dans ses paiements".⁴⁰

In fact the firm was one of the most seriously affected by the lack of Tunisian coinage in circulation in Tunis ensuing from the establishment of the French Protectorate.

6.7 Problem of Coinage

The government in Paris and its administration in Tunis, earnestly sought the country's

³⁸ FO 335 166/3 Hough to Reade, Tunis, May 17, 1886.

³⁹ MAE, Correspondance Politique, vol 88, Caid of Mehedba to Prime Minister, April 10, 1884, annexe to Despatch of December 21, 1885, Direction Politique, no. 337.

⁴⁰ MAE, Correspondance Politique, Rapports Mensuel des Territoires du Sud, November, 1883.

entry in the Union Latine in order to standardise and improve business relations with France and Algeria. They aimed to achieve this however, gradually, with the minimum of disruption to local trade:

"Le but auquel on doit tendre en Tunisie, au point de vue de la circulation monetaire, est evidemment, d'y introduire progressivement le regime etabli en France, en Algerie et en Italie. L'identite du systeme monetaire facilite en effet les relations commerciales reduit a des proportions sans importance des cours du change, enfin fait disparaitre un agio, qui constitue sans doute, une source de benefice pour un nombre restreint de speculateurs, mais represente une sorte de contribution prelevee par eux sur la masse des consommateurs et de producteurs".⁴¹

The integration of the Protectorate into the Union Latine would pave the way for the expansion of French capitalism in Tunisia. Since 1881 the two monetary systems had co-existed to the detriment of French business, since the French currency still did not have a legal exchange value in the country. Furthermore the people of Tunisia distrusted the new currency, preferring to use only Tunisian, or other, coinage which they were accustomed to.⁴² As a result the exchange rate rose to "excessive levels"⁴³ making it extremely difficult for traders to procure sufficient amounts of piastres to carry on their businesses. For those such as the Franco-English Company, dealing directly with the tribes the problem became acute. The firm

"...se vit refuser par ses ouvriers la monnaie divisionnaire francaise qu'elle avait apportee en grande quantite a Skhira; et laissait son personnel sans solde au detriment de son exploitation et de la tranquillite publique; elle dut se mettre a la recherche de monnaies tunisiennes qu'elle ne parvint a se procurer qu'a grande peine et a grands frais".⁴⁴

⁴¹ MAE Finances (Monnaies-Banques-Credit Foncier) tome I: octobre 1880- mars 1887, Annexe a la Depeche no 1, du 5 janvier 1887, adressee par le Ministre des Finances aux Affaires Etrangeres. Note concernant la circulation monetaire en Tunisie, p. 168. Quoted in Summit, C. (1983) p. 57.

⁴² The French had experienced a similar situation in Algeria, where even after fifty years of rule, the tribes continued to prefer dealing in a variety of other coinage which they used and trusted, rather than the French paper money. See Correspondence Politique vol 77, Extrait du Report de la Residence Francais a Tunis au MAE, June 11, 1883.

⁴³ *Ibid.*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*.

However, in comparison with other merchants operating in the country, the Franco-English company was in something of a privileged position in that it held the exclusive rights to the alfa collected on Bou-Hedma. The tribes of the district had no alternative outlet for their grass. As a consequence, instead of paying cash to the tribes, the Company proffered promissory notes on receipt of alfa which were redeemable in two months but only for goods stocked at the firm's own yard at Skhira. It was able, therefore, to avoid to a large extent the need to purchase local currency. Furthermore, the goods for which these bonds could be exchanged were sold at exorbitant rates.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, despite or perhaps because of these measures, the Company's business slumped further in 1884, exports of alfa grass falling sharply to only 1,988 tons. Given that the contract stipulated minimum annual exports of 10,000 tons, the firm was facing the prospect of seeing its concession annulled by default. The Company naturally blamed the continuing legal wrangle with the French authorities over the proposed railway which was also delaying the delimitation of the remainder of the concession. As this dispute was not of their making the Franco-English Company brought, in March of 1884, a legal action against the Government for damages and ten years lost profits, amounting in total to 9,750,000 francs.⁴⁶ They also sought the exclusion of the period of the dispute from the terms of the contract.

6.8 Legal Proceedings

Although Cambon, the French Resident General, offered to allow the construction of the tramway on the condition that the legal proceedings against the Government were dropped, the Company persisted. On March 5, 1884, the Tribunal Arbitrale found in favour of the Company on the question of the railway, stating that it could not be held to construct a railway or tramway on more onerous terms than those outlined in the Beylical Decree of June 1881. Moreover the Tribunal upheld the Company's request that the period of dispute, from February 1, 1883 until April 30, 1884, should be

⁴⁵ AGT Serie E, carton 233, dossier 10, Various Correspondence.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

withdrawn from the time-scale of the contract which was to re-start on May 1, 1884. However, as no formal request for approval of the tramway had been submitted, the Tribunal decided that the Government could not be held responsible for any losses sustained by the firm and the claim for damages was refused.⁴⁷

Yet it was only one year later, in April, 1885 that the firm finally did submit formal proposals for the construction of a light tramway on the Lartique system (purchased from a Belgium contractor) and not until October of 1885 that the French authorities finally gave its approbation to the project subject to certain stringent conditions.⁴⁸

Furthermore, although during his visit to the country in April, when the plans for the tramway were submitted, Hough had also under-taken a delimitation of the mountains concerned with agents approved by the government, this had yet to be sanctioned by October, 1885 at which point the firm sent their lawyer, Alfred Mattei to Tunis to increase pressure on the government to force their ratification. Although the government relented, it demanded that a new delimitation be made.

6.9 The Delimitation of Madjoura, Heddadj and El Ayascha Mountains

Throughout this period the other alfa merchants continued to conduct their affairs normally, arranging with tribes outwith Bou-Hedma Mountain for the delivery of alfa to yards on the coast. They were, however, careful not to fall foul of the terms of the Franco-English Company's concession and where any possible doubts as to the legality of their activities arose, clarification was sought from the French authorities. Thus in April, 1885, the French merchant, J. H. Mattei (no relation to Alfred Mattei), on behalf of the Marseille firm, Grawitz et Fils, itself acting for Perry Bury, asked the government's permission to enter into a contract with various fractions of the Ouled Aziz of the Hammama confederation for the collection of 80,000 piastres (£2,000)

⁴⁷ AGT E233/10 Tribunal Arbitral du mars 7, 1884.

⁴⁸ AGT E 233/10. The agreement, dated October 7, 1885 stipulated that the tramway would have to be completed within nine months. The delay in submitting plans for the tramway may in part be due to the failure of discussions with a British firm on a light railway. See FO 335 166/5, Report of FETEFSCCL, April 14, 1886.

worth of grass to be delivered over a period of 18 months. The terms of the contract clearly stipulated that all the grass would be collected outwith the mountains conceded to the Franco-English Company. The French Director of Finances agreed and approved of the deal which was duly registered at the French Consulate in Sfax on July 15, 1885.⁴⁹

Subsequently, the firm purchased from the Caid of the Souessi tribe, a house and land opposite the yard belonging to the Franco-English Company at Skhira where they erected a hydraulic press. Alfred Mattei, however, considered that the land belonging to the Hammama tribe as a whole did in fact constitute part of the concession and instructed the Justice of the Peace at Sfax to seize the possessions of Grawitz at Skhira, including 700 tons of grass already delivered.⁵⁰

During the delimitation of the mountains undertaken in early November in the company of the chief engineer of the French administration, Nouette, and Hartmayer, the Controleur Civil of Gafsa, Mattei, with the apparent approval of his French companions, made every effort to halt all sales of grass to any but the Company's representatives at Skhira. The Caid of the Hamama was instructed to tell his people that their contract with Grawitz was illegal and that henceforth all the alfa on their land belonged to the Franco-English Company alone. Guards were placed along the northeastern edge of the concession to stop, and redirect to Skhira, any caravans heading for Sfax.⁵¹ The Caid of the Aroua even imprisoned the driver of one caravan who refused to obey these instructions.⁵²

The effect of these measures on the trade of Sfax was a dramatic decline in alfa

⁴⁹ "Proces des Alfes. Jugement rendu le 5 mars 1886 par le Tribunal de Tunis, entre le Franco-English Tunisian Esparto Supply Company, Limited et MM Grawitz et fils," 1886. Bone: Imprimerie Typographique.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*.

⁵¹ FO 335 165/5 Leonardi to Sandwith, Sfax, February 13, 1886.

⁵² AGT Series E, carton 233.

exports. Leadbetter, Perry Bury's agent at Sfax, reported that purchases from the Hamama tribe alone fell sharply from 5,000 tons in 1883 to 4,000 tons in 1884 and to only 1,900 tons in 1885. Similar decreases were noticed in deliveries of grass by the Agareb, Fraichiche, Zlass and Madger tribes. In total Perry Bury's exports from Sfax declined by more than fifty percent from 6,200 ton in 1883 to only 2,750 tons in 1885 (Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 Alfa purchases made by Perry Bury at Sfax (Tons)

Tribe	1883	1884	1885
Hamamma	5,000	4,000	1,900
Agareb	350	150	300
Zlass, Madger, Fraichiche	850	550	550
Total	6,200	4,700	2,750

Source: *Correspondance Politique* vol. 88, 9th annexe "Achats de sparte par divers", Leadbetter to Resident General, Sfax, December 21, 1885.

Sixteen merchants at Sfax complained bitterly of the firm's abuses and the apparent complicity of Novette and Hartmayer:

"...depuis deux mois environs, grace aux agissements de la Franco-Anglaise, les Amemmas ne paraissent plus sur le marche de Sfax et que le manque d'arrivages de sparte sur notre marche se prononce de plus en plus surtout depuis que M. L'Avocat anglais Mattei, et M. le Controleur civil de Gafsa, se rendus aupres des Amemas pour les amener a reconnaitre que leurs montagnes devaient faire partie de la concession de Bouhedma".⁵³

The Resident General sympathised fully with the merchants' point of view although he denied and allegations of duplicity on the part of the two French representatives in the delimitation. In a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs he made it plain that the complaints:

⁵³ MAE, *Correspondance Politique*, vol. 88, 10th Annexe a la depeche du 21 decembre 1885. Direction Politique no 337, Letter dated December 10, 1885 to M. le Consul de France et Controleur Civil de Sfax.

"...sont fondees de tous points, sauf bien entendu, en ce que concerne la regularite des operations de delimitation et l'attitude de M. Hartmayer, mais l'acte de concession ne me permet pas d'y faire droi. Ce deni, qui m'est impose, sera je crains, l'origine de graves difficultes dans un prochain avenir".⁵⁴

It is clear that Hartmayer's view on the concession differed greatly from that of the French administration. In allowing the most generous interpretation of the delimitation, Hartmayer was trying to compensate for what he saw as the loss of economic potential caused to the Franco-English Company on Bou-Hedma Mountain which had suffered greatly from over-cropping. The administration's policy on territorial concessions in general, and that of the alfa resources in particular had not changed since the original objections to the latter raised some three years earlier.

6.10 Reaction of Resident General Bompard

Although it was felt concessions could and, in the future would, hasten economic development and prosperity, it was also believed that at this time they would lead to increased expense to the government and provoke a potentially dangerous disharmony amongst the different sections of society. This is evident in a letter from the Resident General to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1885:

"Le systeme des concessions territoriales peut quelque fois etre favorable a la richesse publique, il peut surtout en hater le developpement, au detriment toutefois de l'avenir pour lequel il est toujours un embarras; mais, sans contredit, il est, dans le present, une source de discorde entre le individus et de depenses pour l'Etat. Sous le regime de l'expansion naturelle de l'industrie et de l'agriculture, il en est tout different. Le commerce exerce librement, rapproche sans contrainte vainqueurs et vaincus, confond leurs interets, etend les haines, fait naitre les sympathies; c'est ce role pacificateur qu'il a rempli dans le monde entier, c'est celui qu'il joue en Tunisie depuis plus de trois ans. La liberte dans les echanges, l'egalite dans les transactions ont pu deplaire a ceux qui voient dans les colonies un proces livre a leurs appetits; mais c'est grace a l'harmonie qui en est resultee qu'il a ete possible avec les moyens d'action imparfait, le personnel restreint et le modiques ressources dont dispose le Gouvernement Tunisien d'administrer la Regence d'y maintenir l'ordre, d'y

⁵⁴ MAE, Correspondence Politique, vol. 88, Direction Politique no 337, Tunis, December 21, 1885.

assurer la securite de faire face a tous les besoins d'un rapide developpement".⁵⁵

Bompard believed that free trade and free exchange would protect the Arabs from such abuses of privileges which were now being perpetrated by the Franco-English Company on the southern tribes and at the same time ensure equality of opportunity to the great number of traders already operating in the country. The French administration was witnessing the exploitation of the tribes by the Franco-English Company and Bompard could only see this intensify with the expansion of the extent of the concession. The burden would fall squarely on the shoulders of the poorest sections of the tribal population for whom alfa was a necessity for survival and for whom, therefore, the value of alfa was largely unrelated to European price fluctuations. Thus:

"Elle suffit aux indigenes pour qui le temps n'a pas de valeur et dont les chameaux seule occupaient une partie de l'annee. Elle ne saurait suffir a une administration europeenne laquelle meme avec un privelege ne peut que ruiner les indigenes sans tirer elle-meme grand profit de leur ruine".⁵⁶

While safeguards against exploitation existed within the terms of all concessions, territorial or otherwise, these were largely unheeded with regards that of alfa since,

"...une pareille clause, en matiere d'exploitation de l'alfa est, en effet, inapplicable; son execution rendrait la concession illusoire. Les veritables privileges du concessionnaire [est]...l'avilissement de la main d'oeuvre par la suppression de la concurrence...".⁵⁷

This explains the Resident General's reaction to the Comte de Nesmoud's request in November 1885 for an alfa concession on similar terms to that enjoyed by the Franco-English Company, covering the Aradh region in the far south, which the administration refused in re-stating its position quite clearly:

⁵⁵ MAE, Correspondence Politique vol. 88, Bompard a MAE, December 21, 1885.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

"Les difficultes qui resulteraient de l'exercice d'une concession seraient particulierement graves...dans...l'Arad. Le bon vouloir des Ouerghemmas est indispensable a la tranquilité de la Regence entiere; pour la troubler ils n'ont en effet, qu'a laisser traverser leur territoire par des bandes de pillards de la frontiere tripolitaine de sorte que leur inertie seule est un danger; c'est pourquoi, afin de s'assurer leurs concours, le gouvernement tunisien leur a fait la remise des impots".⁵⁸

While there were undoubted commercial advantages to the creation of an alfa concession in the Aradh, these were far outweighed by the political ramifications such a move would have:

"Dut une concession d'alfa dans l'Arad presenter des avantages commerciaux, les mouvements politiques qui en resulteraient sont tels qu'elle ne doit, en aucun cas, etre octroyee."⁵⁹

In fact the delimitation of the concession and the business methods of the Franco-English company were already causing great concern amongst the southern tribes:

"Mais, il n'en existe pas moins un vif mecontentement a Sfax, a Gabes et dans les tribus, qui se trouvent atteintes dans leurs interets par les dernieres operations de la Commission chargee de delimiter les terrains alfatiers concedes a la Compagnie Franco Anglaise".⁶⁰

Prices offered by the company continued to be inferior to those offered on the open market. Leadbetter reported to the French Consul at Sfax that while the Company was paying the Hammama tribes 6.5 piastres per quintal with a 25% deduction made to cover the weight lost during the drying process, they would have received at Sfax 6.5 piastres without this deduction being imposed. Leadbetter calculated that this represented a loss to the Hammama of 150,000 piastres per annum (£3,750) which the

⁵⁸ Correspondence Politique vol. 88, Direction Politique 337, Bompard to MAE, December 21, 1885.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*.

⁶⁰ MAE, Nouvelle Serie, vol. 281, Rapport Mensuel, January 1886.

Company took as additional profit.⁶¹ The Mehedba tribe also protested strongly against the low prices being offered by the company at Skira.⁶²

6.11 The Ratification

Given the Resident General's view of the concession, Hartmayer's generous interpretation of its territorial extent is difficult to understand and whether or not he acted with the former's consent is unclear. Whichever is the case, the delineation had been made in strict accordance with the terms of the contract and the government had little option but to accept it. Further delay risked renewed litigation with the Franco-English Company and a potentially expensive settlement. The delimitation was, therefore, ratified by Beylical decree of December 21, 1885.⁶³

The Franco-English Company was jubilant with the outcome, triumphantly declaring it "a vindication of the Board's position from the start",⁶⁴ the boundaries containing

"...an area of about three million acres inhabited by many Arab tribes amongst whom are the powerful Hammamas who have worked the esparto for many years and who are now collecting grass for the Company".⁶⁵

The concession's limits bore little resemblance to those in the original contract although it should be noted that the objections now raised against it were almost exactly the same as those put forward when the agreement with Duplessis came to light. An article in the French language newspaper, *La Lanterne* summed up the opinion of many when it wrote:

⁶¹ Correspondance Politique, vol. 88, Direction Politique 337, Leadbetter to Zichel.

⁶² MAE Nouvelle Serie, vol. 281, Rapport Mensuel, December 1887.

⁶³ *Journal Officiel Tunisien*, December 25, 1885.

⁶⁴ FO 335 166/5 Report of the FETEFSC Ltd., April 14, 1886.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*.

"Il est officiellement établi que sous prétexte de délimiter une concession que comprenant quatre montagnes et ne s'étendant pas sur cent mille hectares, on a livré à la Compagnie anglo-tunisienne un territoire de plus d'un million hectares contenant plus de cinquante montagnes".⁶⁶

Once again the alfa merchants raised questions of a monopoly which, they claimed, would have been in breach of the terms of the Anglo-Tunisian Commercial Treaty of 1875. But while receiving the support of British consular officials on this point, the Foreign Office in London refused to sanction protests to Tunisian authorities on this point since, as the Ouerghemma mountains remained outwith the concession, it could not constitute a true monopoly.

While technically correct, London's position infuriated British merchants in Tunis since the great majority of their supplies came from land included within the concession.

Perry Bury wrote to the Marquis of Salisbury complaining that,

"...if this delimitation is allowed to pass unchallenged, it will convert the esparto into a veritable monopoly which will be in the hands of the concessionnaires and ourselves and other esparto merchants will find our trade ruined and the large sums we have laid out for carrying on the trade absolutely lost".⁶⁷

Not only was the repayment of these advances in jeopardy, but the merchants also faced the prospect of being unable to fulfil contracts with brokers in the UK for which the transportation had already been arranged and paid for.⁶⁸ Shortly after the decree the merchants at Sfax complained that:

⁶⁶ La Lanterne, May 3, 1886.

⁶⁷ FO 881/5334, Confidential Papers, January 21, 1886.

⁶⁸ "...la nullité du marché de Sfax les mettaient dans l'impossibilité de remplir les engagements pris en Europe et que bientôt ils verraient arriver sur le rade de Sfax des navires auxquels ils ne pourraient rien donner." Tenth Annexe to Despatch, etc., December 10, 1885, 16 Sfax Merchants, MAE Correspondance Politique, vol. 88, 1885.

"...extending the boundaries of the conceded mountains has nearly driven us altogether from the market and if this decree is not modified we shall have greatly to reduce our establishments and perhaps...withdraw from the Regency altogether".⁶⁹

But it was by no means just the Sfax trade which was threatened by the decree, for the concession also included 160,000 hectares of land belonging to the Zlass, the principal suppliers of grass to Sousse, and 165,000 hectares of Beni Zid land which furnished Gabes.⁷⁰

The Tunisian alfa trade was paralysed by the concession exports falling from a post-rebellion peak in 1883/84 of 21,995 tons to only 13,779 tons in 1886/87, the latterly barely above the levels of the years 1881-1883 when a large number of Arabs were in Tripoli (see Table 6.2). Many merchants were forced to lay off workers and scale down their operations in the country.⁷¹

Table 6.2 Tunisian Exports of Alfa Grass 1878/79-1886/87⁷²

Year	Tons	Year	Tons
1878/79	17,909	1883/84	21,995
1879/80	24,540	1884/85	18,286
1880/81	29,366	1885/86	15,400
1881/82	12,697	1886/87	13,779
1882/83	12,593		

Source: Report on Trade of Tunis for 1887, Sandwith.

But the Franco-English Company hardly benefited from its near monopoly position,

⁶⁹ FO 102/168 Perry Bury to Sandwith, January 9, 1886.

⁷⁰ FO 102/168 Sandwith to Roseberry, January 14, 1886.

⁷¹ See for example, AGT, E 233/10, Anonymous trader to Controleur Civil, Sfax, February 10, 1886.

⁷² Report on Trade of Tunis for 1887, Sandwith.

partly because of its own actions in dealing with the tribes and partly due to favourable climatic conditions in the south of the country and a continued fall in the value of alfa in the UK which will be examined in the following chapter. The firm's exports were only 4,010 tons in 1885⁷³ and 5,635 tons in 1886.⁷⁴ The Company's combined exports for the three years 1884-86 were only 11,633 tons, well short of the 30,000 tons defined in the contract as the minimum allowed during the first three years. As a result the French were able to announce the abrogation of the concession by decree of July 31, 1887; despite repeated attempts by the Franco-English firm to overturn the decision, it was stripped of all the benefits which it had enjoyed.⁷⁵

6.12 Conclusion

The creation of a concession for the exploitation of alfa in the Regency posed a number of serious problems for the new French authorities. The most important, of course, was its effect on the peace and stability of the tribal populations of the south and centre of the country. Not only was the region of great strategic importance because of its proximity to Algeria where tribal unrest, supported by a contraband trade in arms and ammunition from Tunisia and by cross-border co-operation between Tunisian and Algerian tribes, continued to pose a grave threat to French authority; it was also crucial for the establishment of the Protectorate in Tunis. The massive uprising against the French invasion was a clear sign of the extent of indigenous hostility to foreign intervention. Unlike in Algeria, though, there was no possibility of a large and permanent military presence in the country to maintain order. In Tunis this would have to be achieved by bolstering and extending the existing administrative structures and by avoiding unduly antagonising relations with the tribes. This was clearly going to be no easy task.

However much the process of integration of tribal society within the political and

⁷³ FO 335 166/3 Hough to Sandwith, May 7, 1886.

⁷⁴ Controleur Civil, Sfax to M. le Ministre Resident General de France a Tunis, May 17, 1887. AGT Serie E, carton 233, dossier 10.

⁷⁵ *Journal Official Tunisien*, August 4, 1887, no. 187.

economic structures of the country as a whole had progressed, it was far from complete, a fact manifested in its reaction to the French invasion. The creation of such a concession covering much of the south hardly helped either the process of integration or even the establishment of peaceful relations. The tribes viewed it as an attack on their inalienable rights to their property and a further subversion of local autonomy to central government. The French were keenly aware of the problems which such a concession could create in the south but were forced to accept it because it had been legally ratified by the Bey before the establishment of their Protectorate.

Despite being able to exclude the mountains of the Ouerghemma from the terms of the concession and confirming the rights to pasture of the tribes on the land, the operation of the concession soon gave rise to serious threats to order as the Franco-English company began to abuse its privilege by offering lower prices than the other traders and by paying with bonds and not cash. Threats made to tribes by the company's employees against collecting for the account of anyone other than the company only heightened tensions amongst the tribes as they found themselves unable to deal freely in their grass.

The concession, and the Franco-English Company's methods in working it, also threatened livelihoods of the many established alfa merchants who found it increasingly difficult to procure grass from outside the vast territory conceded. Substantial advances paid to the Arabs before the ratification of the contract were lost and heavy costs of chartering ships to fulfil contracts in Britain were sustained. Exports fell to levels well below the peak achieved in 1881 in spite of continued high demand in the U.K..

The abolition of the concession, which was met with universal approval in Tunisia, brought great hopes for a resurgence in the flagging fortunes of the alfa trade in the country. And indeed trade statistics of the years immediately following the suppression of the concession would appear to justify these hopes. In 1888, exports rose by 54% to 21,268 tons, and by a further 20% in 1889 to 25,159 tons, the second highest level ever recorded. While falling back slightly in 1890 to 20,669 tons, exports remained high.

This boom however, was short lived. In 1891, exports fell back to 14,429 tons at which level they were to remain until the end of the period under study in 1896. In fact, far from being a sign of the beginnings of a long term prosperity in the trade, the excellent exports achieved between 1888 and 1890 actually reflect the severity of the agricultural/pastoral crisis in the country during these years and only served to paper over the trade's fundamental weakness, i.e. the continued fall in the value of alfa. The return of better harvests in the 1890's at a time of falling prices made it difficult to persuade the tribes to collect the grass. The problems for Tunisian alfa merchants were considerably exacerbated by the maintenance of high export duties which weakened the competitiveness of Tunisian grass in the UK market place where abundant supplies of cheap Algerian and Tripolitanian grasses were augmented by a rapid rise in imports of cheap wood pulp from Scandanavia.



Chapter Seven

International Competition and its Effect on the Geography of the Tunisian Alfa Trade

7.1 Introduction

The ending of the Duplessis concession in 1887 brought about a resurgence in business confidence in the future of the trade amongst Tunisian alfa merchants, an optimism which, on the surface, was justified in the succeeding three years to 1890, during which period exports of alfa rose sharply, almost reaching the record levels achieved immediately prior to the establishment of the Protectorate.

But the success of these years was largely attributable to the severity of the drought and consequent economic distress of much of the population of the southern districts. The underlying trend of exports was clearly one of stagnation.

Tunisian production was coming under increasing pressure in the international market as a result of changes in the balance of supply and demand for raw material inputs in the British paper industry. In fact, growing competition from wood pulp began to check the trend of rising consumption of alfa grass from the late 1880's and this, together with much higher production of the grass in Algeria and Tripolitania, heightened competitive pressure and drove prices in Britain downwards. Tunisian output, small in comparison to that of her neighbours, was least able to adapt to changing international circumstances constrained as it was by both a high cost base and an excessive export duty.

7.2 International Competition and Price Pressure

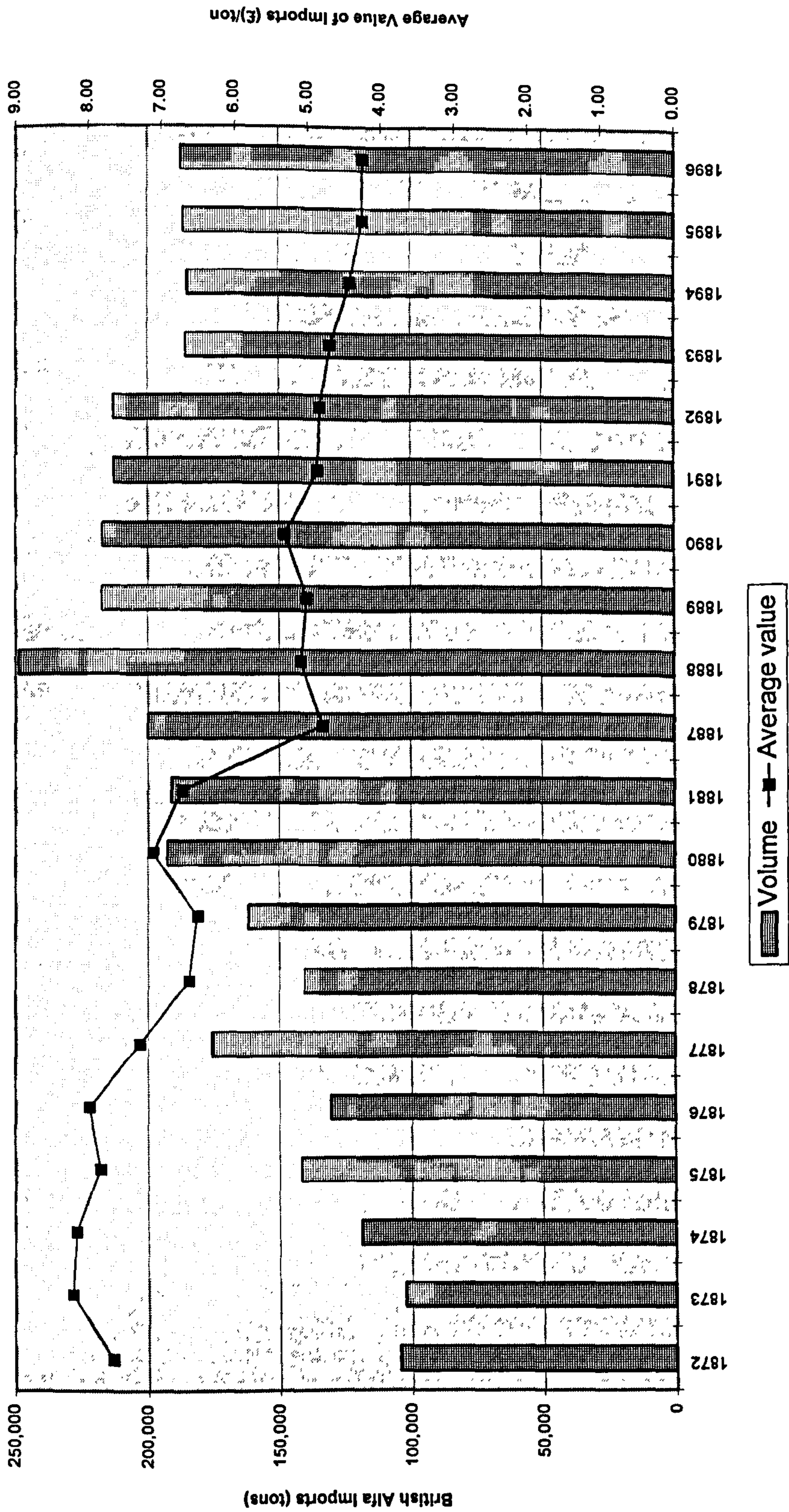
British imports of alfa grass remained high during the decade 1887-1896 averaging 205,297 tons each year compared to only 145,978 tons per annum between 1872 and 1881 (Table 7.1 and Figure 7.1). The peak, however, was reached in 1888 when Britain imported 248,836 tons of the material. Thereafter imports began to decline and by 1896, reached only 187,289 tons, a lower volume than that achieved in 1880 and

Table 7.1 British Imports of Alfa Grass 1872-1881 and 1887-1896 by volume and value

Year	Volume (tons)	Value (pt)	Average value (pt per ton)
1872	104,621	803,396	7.68
1873	102,649	843,672	8.22
1874	119,176	973,383	8.16
1875	141,900	1,113,285	7.85
1876	130,891	1,046,449	7.99
1877	175,878	1,286,237	7.31
1878	140,505	932,300	6.64
1879	161,971	1,055,616	6.52
1880	192,493	1,372,573	7.13
1881	191,229	1,286,211	6.73
Total	1,461,313	10,712,122	
Average	146,131	1,071,212	7.33
1887	200,116	962,049	4.81
1888	248,836	1,270,324	5.11
1889	217,256	1,090,266	5.02
1890	217,028	1,154,722	4.82
1891	212,666	1,033,938	4.86
1892	212,967	1,029,901	4.84
1893	185,450	870,431	4.69
1894	184,960	819,265	4.43
1895	186,408	791,236	4.24
1896	187,278	796,683	4.25
Total	2,052,965	9,709,815	
Average	205,297	970,082	4.73

Sources: Figures for 1872-1881 from British Parliamentary Papers (1873) LXIII; (1874) LXIV; (1875) LXIII; (1876) LXII; (1877) LXXX; (1878) LXXI; (1878-79) LXVIII; (1880) LXXI; (1881) LXXXVII; (1882) LXVIII. Figures for 1887-1896 from Cross, C.F. and E.F. Bevan, (1900) p. 384.

British Imports of Alfa Grass in tons and average value in £/ton
1872-1881 and 1887-1896



1881. While even this was still above levels of most years since the trade began, it is clear that demand was beginning to slacken towards the end of the 1880's.

What is perhaps most striking from the data in Table 7.1 is the very marked decline in the average value of alfa imports into Britain. This is evident even in the years of continuous growth between 1871 and 1881 which, while showing an average for the whole period of £7.33, suffered a fall from £8.22 per ton in 1873 to only £6.73 per ton in 1881, a reduction of 18 percent. The decline, however, was much more severe after that date with an average value of £4.73 between 1887 and 1896 closing the period at £4.25, almost 50 percent below the grass's value in 1873.

In the period former to 1881 the decline in average value per ton can be attributed mainly to increasing imports from the new sources of alfa in north Africa and the diminishing importance of Spain. In the early years of the trade British demand was almost entirely met by Spanish production renowned for its quality and high yield of cellulose. But with continuing political uncertainty and problems of over-cropping becoming more serious in Spain, the rapidly rising demand for the grass in Britain could only be met by securing supplies from north Africa. Although of inferior quality, it was also lower in price and as prices for paper in Britain were suffering continuous downward pressure, many manufacturers embraced the new articles with enthusiasm. *The Papermakers Circular* of August, 1876 noted that:

"Paper-makers show more and more a disinclination to give the prices asked for Spanish.... Indeed so largely has the high rates for Spanish compelled the adoption of other descriptions that many consumers having therefore adapted their trade to the use of these will not again resort to Spanish unless a reaction may bring the Spanish to a more reasonable figure, especially considering the extremely low prices now only attainable for paper of fine, and indeed, all qualities." ¹

Thus while in 1869 Spanish grass accounted for 95% of British imports, this had fallen to only 27% by 1880, the steepest fall in market share being in 1877 (see Table 7.2).

¹ *The Papermakers Circular and Rag Merchants and Wholesale Stationers Weekly Gazette and Price Current*, No. 50, vol. V, August 15, 1876, p. 4.

Price rather than quality had become the market’s main imperative by the middle of the 1870’s as consumers in Britain turned more and more to the coarser, lower yielding but cheaper grasses of north Africa.

During the 1880’s, however, competitive pressures intensified with the increasing use of wood pulp for the manufacture of paper. From only 75,533 tons in 1887 British imports of wood pulp had reached 327,080 tons by 1896 by which date it had outpaced

Table 7.2 British Imports of Spanish Alfa by Volume and Percentage of Total Alfa Imports (1865-1880)

Year	Quantity (tons)	Percent of the total	Year	Quantity (tons)	Percent of the total
1865	47,239	90	1873	53,926	53
1866	65,859	95	1874	54,242	46
1867	50,378	91	1875	56,474	39
1868	92,927	97	1876	45,499	35
1869	82,355	95	1877	43,394	25
1870	72,835	71	1878	37,892	27
1871	80,472	56	1879	44,091	27
1872	55,909	53	1880	51,413	27

Source: *BPP* (1866-1881)

alfa imports in both volume and value.² Although wood pulp was not to entirely replace either alfa or rags in the British paper industry until the second half of the twentieth century, its dramatic growth during the nineteenth century stimulated competition in the alfa trade and drove down prices. Thus between 1880 and 1895, prices for all qualities of alfa in the British market fell by about fifty percent (Table 7.3).

² Cross and Bevan, (1900) p. 304.

Table 7.3 Selected Prices for Alfa Grass in the British Market (Spot Prices of Alfa (£.s.d/ton) in London (cif))

Year	Spain	Algeria	Sousse	Sfax/Gabes	Tripoli
1874	8/05/0	7/00/0	7/10/0	-	6/00/0
1875	10/00/0	6/10/0	8/00/0	-	5/10/0
1876	11/10/0	7/05/0	8/15/0	6/12/6	5/10/0
1877	9/00/0	6/00/0	7/10/0	5/05/0	4/10/0
1878	7/00/0	5/15/0	7/00/0	5/10/0	4/15/0
1879	7/10/0	6/00/0	7/05/0	5/15/0	4/10/0
1880	9/10/0	5/15/0	7/15/0	5/15/0	5/00/0
1881	9/10/0	6/07/6	7/05/0	5/10/0	5/10/0
1882	8/10/0	6/15/0	7/10/0	6/15/0	6/10/0
1883	8/05/0	5/07/6	7/02/6	5/15/0	5/00/0
1884	7/05/0	4/17/6	-	5/05/0	4/17/6
1885	7/00/0	4/17/6	-	5/02/6	4/12/6
1886	5/05/0	4/02/6	-	4/05/0	3/12/6
1887	5/07/6	3/16/3	-	4/02/6	4/02/6
1888	5/12/6	4/07/6	-	4/12/6	3/13/9
1889	5/12/6	3/12/6	-	4/02/6	3/17/6
1890	5/15/0	3/15/0	-	4/02/6	3/16/3
1891	5/05/0	3/16/3	-	4/01/3	3/15/0
1892	5/15/0	3/17/6	-	4/00/0	3/10/0
1893	5/12/6	3/10/0	-	3/15/0	3/07/6
1894	4/12/6	3/00/0	-	3/13/9	3/02/6
1895	4/10/0	3/00/0	-	3/10/0	3/05/0
1896	4/07/6	3/01/3	-	3/12/6	2/15/0
1897	4/07/6	3/00/0	-	3/05/0	2/15/0
1898	4/15/0	2/17/6	-	3/00/0	2/15/0

Source: *Paper Makers Circular and Rag Merchant and Stationer's Gazette and Price Current*

Note: Where no London price available, Newcastle has been used. All prices quoted are from the month of August.

The sharp fall in the value of alfa, which became more marked from 1885, resulted in an intensification of competition amongst the three north African producers. Tunisia, the smallest supplier, found itself increasingly less able to compete with her neighbours which were able to maintain, even increase, output despite a reduction in prices offered to the collectors in line with the falling value of alfa in the British market.

7.3 The Trade in Algeria

As discussed in Chapter Three, Algeria was the first country, outside of Spain, to supply alfa to the British market. Small scale collection began, using Spanish immigrant labour, in 1862/1863; but it was not until 1870 that production began to flourish (see Table 7.4).³

Algeria's resources in alfa were vast. Although growing over large areas in the Department of Constantine and to the south of Algiers to a lesser extent, by far the most important source was the Department of Oran where the plant covered huge areas of land.

The French government was quick to see the benefits of the alfa industry in Algeria. Economically it provided considerable wealth to the country and to the underprivileged regions and inhabitants in particular. Politically, commercialization in general was seen as the best means of integrating the tribes into the nation-state, of breaking down ethnic ties and promoting territorial boundaries.

But it was also realised at an early stage in the development of the trade in Algeria that the income earned from alfa grass would not only facilitate the tribes' tax payments but also save the government a significant amount of expense during years of drought and famine in the tribal regions by reducing the amount of subsistence support and loans to a population deprived of any other means of procuring income.

³ Spanish labour was quickly phased out for practical reasons as much as cost. See Association de l'Afrique du Nord, (1890), "Le Commerce de l'Alfa," p. 12.

"...les indigenes s'y adonnent de plus en plus et dans les annees calamiteuses que certaines regions ont traversee. Cette industrie a sauve de la famine de nombreuses tribus auxquelles la secheresse ou les sauterelles avaient enleve tout moyens d'existence."⁴

Alfa grass was seen as a fundamental resource, commercially and politically, in the tribal regions of Algeria and the French government was keen to maximise the commercialisation of the plant by offering adequate incentives to encourage merchants to develop a large scale trade. But it also recognised that a strong measure of government control was required to protect the Arab collectors from exploitation by the foreign merchants and to preserve the alfa itself from over-harvesting, a problem which had crippled the Spanish commerce and one which was already raising concern in the early 1870's in Algeria.

In Algeria the French chose to institute a system of concessions, in which the rights to alfa on huge areas of tribal land were granted to foreign companies at a nominal rent of 0F 10 per hectare and per annum. The tribes inhabiting land conceded under this system retained only the right to gather alfa on their territory for their own consumption, any alfa collected for commercial purposes had to be sold to the concessionary. This was an enormous benefit for the Algerian merchants involved in the trade since, although it did not guarantee supplies (the inhabitants were not forced to collect grass) it eliminated the effects of competition in the internal market and thus stabilised prices at a very low level.

As the lands nearer the coast began to suffer from the effects of over-cropping in the early 1870's the government was able to tie in the offer of larger concessions further inland with the requirement that the concessionary be liable for the construction of railways from the coastal ports. Thus the Compagnie Franco-Algerienne, the largest company in the Algerian trade, was given a concession in 1873 covering 300,000 hectares (later extended to 700,000 hectares) in the high plateaux of Oran and built

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12. "Trois millions de Francs sont ainsi deverses chaque annee sur des regions bien desheritees."

Table 7.4 Alfa Exports from Algeria 1870-1898 (metric tonnes)

Year	Alger	Oran	Constantine	Total
1870	21	42,469	-	42,490
1871	40	60,758	-	60,838
1872	280	43,374	-	43,654
1873	511	44,754	-	45,265
1874	692	57,387	-	58,079
1875	265	56,106	20	56,391
1876	543	57,903	254	58,700
1877	1,563	66,159	1,034	68,756
1878	120	59,378	616	60,114
1879	1,999	60,240	351	62,590
1880	3,035	75,930	1,930	80,895
1881	4,396	49,932	6,855	61,183
1882	6,995	72,841	5,664	85,500
1883	6,137	68,851	9,172	84,160
1884	3,321	82,023	11,129	96,473
1885	2,249	88,264	6,031	96,544
1886	2,421	74,964	3,562	80,947
1887	899	80,959	1,322	83,180
1888	n/a	n/a	n/a	75,517
1893	n/a	n/a	n/a	68,535
1894	n/a	n/a	n/a	81,882
1899	n/a	n/a	n/a	96,100

Sources: 1870-1887: Association de l'Afrique du Nord (1890) "Le commerce de 'Alfa'".

1888-1899: *Bulletin de l'Agriculture et du Commerce* (1900) no. 17, "L'exploitation et le commerce de l'alfa en Tunisie".

lines from Arzew on the coast, where it had established its base, to Mecheria and Ain

Sefra via Sarda in 1879. Similarly the Compagnie de l'Ouest Algerienne constructed lines from the coast to Tlemcen and Ras-el-Ma via Sidi-Bel-Abbes.⁵

The construction of these lines gave a significant boost to the trade in Algeria by allowing the exploitation of alfa fields which would otherwise have been left largely untouched. It also overcame (in fact delayed) the problem of over-cropping of the alfa growing near the coast:

"A mesure que s'épuisaient les terrains en alfa, les plus rapprochés du bord de la mer, les lignes de pénétration construites par la Compagnie Franco-Algerienne, puis par la Compagnie de l'Ouest Algerienne, ont permis l'exploitation des régions de plus en plus éloignées en sorte que la production de ce département se maintient à un chiffre considérable".⁶

The cost of transportation was probably the single most important expense involved in the alfa trade in all the north African countries and the new railways not only opened up new, and larger, areas to exploitation they also enabled large volumes to be brought to the coast in a cost effective manner. The system of concessions also considerably helped to keep costs down by eliminating the threat of local competition and assuring the concessionaries a stable resource base. By 1888 concessions for alfa covered 1.5 million hectares of land in Algeria.⁷

Alfa grass in Algeria was big business, volumes justifying large investments in infrastructure and hydraulic presses which helped reduce freight charges to the U.K. By 1876 Algerian exports to Britain already exceeded those of Spain and the country was to maintain its pre-eminence as the principal supplier of grass to the British market until well into the next century (see Table 7.4).

⁵ Bouchwalder (1879) p. 26.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 8. In 1885 the total area farmed out under concessions was 1,095,583 hectares. By 1888 this had risen to 1,534,583 hectares. *Ibid.* p. 8.

⁷ Association de l'Afrique du Nord (1890) p. 10.

7.4 The Alfa Trade in Tripolitania

The alfa trade in Tripolitania began at the same time as that in Tunis, in 1870, but it was, from the beginning, of an altogether much greater magnitude. Unfortunately British import statistics combine Tripoli with Tunisia until 1881, from which date they were reported separately. Nevertheless an indication of the scale of the commerce in the Vilayet is given in Table 7.5 where the exports until 1880 have been calculated by subtracting Tunisian government export data from British statistics for the two countries combined. British Consul General Drummond-Hay noted in 1877 that:

"...by far the most important branch of trade is that of esparto. Ten years ago it was not so much as known, but owing to the great and continued demand for it in England it has rapidly increased, and may be said now to engross the attentions of nearly every merchant and trader, and afford labour and occupation to the major part of the inhabitants."⁸

Ten years later Drummond-Hay reported that alfa accounted for 76% of the country's total exports by value.⁹

Despite the fact that the alfa grass of Tripolitania was of the most inferior quality and without the benefits of either railways or concessions the grass sold at a significant discount to that from other countries on the British market. Undoubtedly an export duty of only 1% *ad valorem* helped keep costs down as did the early use of hydraulic presses which resulted in a material reduction in freight charges on shipment to Britain.¹⁰ Moreover the grass grew relatively near the coast, along the Djebel Nafousa to the south of Tripoli, which made transportation to the ports of Tripoli and Khoms, from where roughly equal amounts were exported, easy and relatively

⁸ British Parliamentary Papers, (1878), LXXIV, p. 789. Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1877.

⁹ British Parliamentary Papers (1889), LXXV. Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1887.

¹⁰ British Parliamentary Papers (1883) LXXII Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1882. The first presses, installed in 1881 by the British Esparto Company, were reported to have cost 500,000 francs. These presses, however, by compressing the bales into smaller volume for weight reduced freight costs by around 40 per cent.

inexpensive. This was particularly so when purchases began, in 1877, from the little

Table 7.5 British Imports of Alfa Grass from Tripolitania

Year	British imports from Tunis and Tripoli combined	Tunisian exports	British imports from Tripoli
1871	11,569	-	-
1872	10,011	-	-
1873	13,791	-	-
1874	18,670	-	-
1875	43,597	-	-
1876	44,708	-	-
1877	75,771	-	-
1878	60,478	-	-
1879	68,910	17,627	51,283
1880	76,110	24,153	51,957
1881	83,335	28,903	54,432
1882	-	12,497	49,672
1883	-	12,395	50,037
1884	-	21,649	33,930
1885	-	17,998	62,149
1886	-	15,157	55,944
1887	-	13,562	50,973
1888	-	21,268	69,626
1889	-	25,159	54,700

Sources : British Imports : volumes LVI (1872), LXIII (1873), LXIV (1874), LXXIII (1875), LXXII (1876), LXXI (1878), LXVIII (1878/79), LXVIII (1882), LXV (1883), LXXVII (1884), LXIV (1884/85), LXXX (1887), XCVII (1888), LXXV (1889).

port of Zleiten 15km to the east of Khoms and 75 km from Tripoli. Zleiten was nearer the alfa districts than the other two ports and merchants were able to make purchases

there at much lower prices.¹¹

In general, however, the tribes of Tripolitania appeared willing to accept much lower prices than the collectors in Algeria and especially Tunisia.¹² This may have been because environmental conditions were more severe than those prevailing in the neighbouring countries.

As a supplier of alfa grass to the British market Tripolitania rivalled Algeria in terms of output despite the much smaller geographical extent of the grass. The competition of Tripolitanian alfa was an important factor in the reduction of alfa prices in Britain.

7.5 The Effects of Price Pressure on the Tunisian Alfa Trade

Throughout the nineteenth century Tunisian alfa exports were dwarfed by those of her north African neighbours and compared unfavourably with even the Spanish trade despite the latter's many problems. Certainly the geographical extent of the grass in Tunisia was much less than that of Algeria or Spain, yet not of Tripoli which consistently produced and exported more than twice as much of the material.

After its spectacular initial growth during the 1870's the Tunisian trade underwent a period of stagnation, even decline, during the last two decades of the century, exports only approaching the peak of 1881 during years of extreme drought and famine such as occurred in 1888 and 1889 (see Table 7.5). Tunisian alfa grass was clearly losing out in the competition to supply the British market. While the trade in Algeria enjoyed the benefits of concessions and railways and that in Tripolitania from the proximity of its grasses to the coast the Tunisian merchants possessed few advantages in an increasingly competitive and price sensitive British market. The Tunisian trade was

¹¹ British Parliamentary Papers vol LXXIV (1878), Report by Consul-General Drummond-Hay on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1877. Zleiten was a dangerous anchorage for ships, particularly in the winter months, and most grass was transported to Khoms or even Tripoli for final shipment to the U.K.

¹² "The camel load sells for about 8 shillings to 12 shillings and it is difficult to comprehend how camels and men can work for so little", *BPP* vol LXXXIII, (1877), Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1876.

hampered by a relatively higher cost base than its competitors a function of an excessive export duty but more importantly of the inaccessibility of the main alfa districts from the coast. These became increasingly important issues as price pressure intensified.

The cost of both internal transport and freight to the UK was the single most important expense in the alfa trade in all countries. This was because of the high bulk to weight ratio of the material. Hydraulic presses, helped reduce the cost of transport by allowing a greater compression of the grass. As noted above the cost of such presses were high and while the volumes of grass in both Algeria and Tripolitania justified the expense that in Tunisia was insufficient to allow a profitable amortization.

In Tunisia the problem was compounded by the distance of the principal alfa districts from the coast. The richest source of alfa was in the high steppe around the settlements of Thala, Feriana, Kasserine and Sbeitla. At over 150 km from the coast these were also the furthest alfa regions from the ports of shipment. Without the benefit of railways the only means of transportation from the interior was the camel, which could carry only up to 250 kg of grass, or the donkey, which was limited to 150 kg burden. The alfa merchants, therefore, had either to arrange and pay for bringing the grass to the ports or simply relied on the tribes to do so. But this would involve the tribes in return journeys to the port of Sousse of as much as eight days. Many tribes were unwilling to leave their animals for such a long period of time particularly in summer when all the animals would be in transhumance. Their movements rarely took the tribes of the high steppe near to the coast the preferred destination being the Tell where both pasture and work could be found in summer if circumstances required. Given the meagre returns from the sale of alfa the prospect of a long journey was far from being attractive. The collection of alfa, as discussed in Chapter Four, was almost entirely limited to tribes for whom little alternative income was available. But these were also the least likely to have animals with which they could take the grass to the ports. For these tribesmen the transportation of their grass could be entrusted to those who possessed animals but at a cost. This cost had to be offset against the income from the sales of the grass. When prices fell too low the cost of transportation, whether paid

for by the merchants or by the tribes, could eliminate any economic benefit from the sale. This was not a great issue in the early years of the Tunisian alfa trade since prices in the British market were high. Moreover, the grass from the Tunisian high steppe was of a much superior quality to other Tunisian or north African grasses and second only to the best Spanish grasses. This grass, which was exported from Sousse, commanded a price premium at a time when quality considerations were still a determining factor in the purchase decision of British papermakers. As Sousse's only direct competitor, Spanish grass, began to suffer from a deterioration in quality and a reduction in availability, the alfa from the Tunisian high steppe provided consumers a satisfactory alternative. The grass of the high steppe, having found a niche in the market, dominated the early years of the Tunisian trade exports from Sfax, and later Gabes, being of only secondary importance.

But from 1874 and more markedly after 1877, prices in the British market suffered a heavy fall as a result of increased competition from other sources of alfa and from greater use of wood pulp. The value of the Sousse article fell by over 13 % in 1877. This grass had relatively limited price flexibility because of the cost of transport. In 1876 the problem was exacerbated when the Government tripled the duty on grass exported from the port while doubling it on grass shipped from Sfax and Gabes. To remain competitive the only possible option was to reduce prices offered to the collectors. In 1877 Perry Bury complained that :

"The greater part of the Esparto brought to Susa for sale has to be carried from a considerable distance that it does not pay the Arab a fair hire for his camel and for the labour of pulling unless he obtains a price which the merchant, under the weight of the present heavy duty, cannot afford to pay. For this reason large tracts of esparto land lie every year unharvested, and so much wealth is lost to the country. For example, the district around Sbeitla produces vast quantities of esparto of the best quality which even under the old duty used to be brought to market, but this region is four days journey from Susa, the price does not now remunerate the Arab and only a small portion is brought to Susa when the pressure of extreme poverty is felt."¹³

¹³ FO 335 144/2, James Douglass, for Perry Bury, to Wood. November 9, 1878.

And Vice-Consul Dupuis commented, also in 1877, that:

"The remoteness of supplies, the difficulty of conveyance overland, the absence of roads, the obstruction in the way of transportation, and the heavy taxation almost caused the stoppage of the trade on this coast in 1877, even in the face of the misery there was in the country."¹⁴

Alfa exports from Sousse fell from 7,476 tons in 1876, the last year of the old duty, to only 3,176 tons in the first ten months of 1877 and Perry Bury reported the withdrawal of every alfa merchant from the trade at the port except itself.¹⁵

Similar, though less severe, problems were experienced at Sfax after the duty was doubled. Sfax was supplied by the Mehedba tribe, which collected grass close to the port, the Beni Zid further west, and the Hammama which occupied the land around Gafsa. The Hammama were some of the most avid participants in the trade no doubt because of the harsher environmental conditions they had to endure. This tribe, in fact, was almost as far from Sfax as the Fraichiche and Madger tribes were from Sousse. Table 7.6 shows the cost of a ton of alfa at the quayside in Sfax in 1877.

The two striking features of the information in Table 7.6 are the importance of transport costs and of government charges. According to Dupuis, when other taxes paid to the Government were included about 22% was rendered to the State and "when prices are reduced to their minimum even as much as 28% is often recoverable."¹⁶

While accurate comparisons with Algeria and Tripoli are impossible without information on other government charges there, the difference in the export tax alone was considerable, only 1% ad valorem being levied in both countries. When freight rates to the UK were added, at between thirty and fifty shillings per ton (some ten

¹⁴ British Parliamentary Papers (1878) LXXIV Report on the Trade and Commerce of Susa for the Year 1877.

¹⁵ FO 335 144/2 Doughane to Wood, November 9, 1878.

¹⁶ British Parliamentary Papers (1878) LXXIV Report on the Trade and Commerce of Susa for the Year 1877.

Table 7.6 Costs Per Ton of Alfa at the Quayside in Sfax in 1877
(British Pounds Sterling)

	£.s.d.
To the Arabs who bring it in	0.18.0
Agent's expenses and those of remittances	0.4.6
Hire of camels to bring it to the coast	1.10.6
Expenses at coast station, shipping it loose in boats	0.6.2
Government charges for notaries	0.0.6½
Government charges for weighing grass when received	0.0.8
Government charges for weighing grass when shipped	0.0.8
Freight for bringing loose grass to a shipping station	0.8.6
Payment to Government weigher	0.0.3
Charges for cleaning, pressing and agency	0.15.7
Notaries and asst. to weigher when shipping bales	0.0.8
Government charges for weigher when shipping	0.0.8
Government duty of export	0.10.4½
Total	4.17.1

Source: British Parliamentary Papers, Report on the Trade and Commerce of Susa for the Year 1877.

shillings higher than that paid in Algeria and Tripoli, mainly because of their installations of hydraulic presses) the profit margin, on a selling price of £5.00 - £6.00 per ton in the UK, was clearly minimal (see Table 7.3).

In 1877 because of the fall in prices in Britain Perry Bury were forced to reduce the offer to the tribes from 48s 6d per ton to only 36s per ton and Perry Bury intimated the withdrawal, from the trade at Susa, of every alfa merchant except itself:¹⁷

¹⁷ FO 335 144/2 Doughane to Wood, November 9, 1878.

"...the British market now being supplied with Algerian grass at cheap prices and as only low ones could be given to the Arabs in the face of the new duty vis 4 shillings less per camel load, they were loathe to bring it in at this reduction.... Everyday more and more the competition of Algerian grass is felt. The quantities in the Oran district seem inexhaustible".¹⁸

Yet in subsequent years exports at Sousse and Sfax actually increased and the feared decline of the trade did not materialize. After 1877 prices stabilized, albeit at the lower level, and the years to 1881, when exports peaked at over 29,000 tons, were marked by continued drought in much of the south and centre. Many collectors were forced to accept the prices offered by the merchants. Although the data in Table 7.7 are of dubious veracity since they are at divergence with both British import statistics and Tunisian customs records they do indicate the prosperity of the alfa trade at Sfax and Sousse until 1881, a point supported by anecdotal evidence and other British consular reports.

Table 7.7. Tunisian Alfa Exports by Port 1880 and 1881

Port	1880	1881
Sousse	12,162	9,933
Sfax	15,679	12,538
Gabes	7,377	5,440
Zarzis	188	550
Total	35,406	26,461

Source : British Parliamentary Papers, vol LXXIV, 1883, Report by Consul General Reade on the Trade and Commerce of Tunis for the Years 1880-1882.

If it was too early in the late 1870's to write off the alfa trade at Sousse or at Sfax, the problems they faced in these years were harbingers of more difficult times ahead. Taxation and transport costs were to take on a new dimension during the 1880's when alfa prices in the UK fell sharply.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*.

7.6 Government Taxation of Alfa Exports

The tax on alfa exports was a bone of contention with merchants from the moment of its inception. Initially the commercialisation of the grass was so sudden and unexpected that there was no tax levied by the government. But after only a few months a tax of one-half piastre per quintal was levied and this was increased again in 1872 to one piastre per quintal provoking widespread dissatisfaction amongst merchants who felt that "...even under the ordinary rate [i.e. one-half piastre] British houses cannot afford to buy as profit can scarcely be obtained".¹⁹ The tax was reduced to one-half piastre again in 1872.

In 1876, however, the government, at the behest of the Financial Commission, doubled the duty levied at Sfax and tripled it at Sousse. The measure was, predictably, a response to the government's financial difficulties.

The Financial Commission was set up in 1869 to oversee and manage the repayment of the Tunisian Government's debts for which it was accorded the rights to the income generated from a number of sources. These, of which there were 29 separate items, came to be known as the Revenues Conceded.

The minimum annual income estimated and agreed by government and Financial Commissioners, to guarantee the repayment of capital and interest owing to creditors, was 10,840,000 piastres (6,500,000 Francs).²⁰ Any shortfall was to be bridged by a contribution from the government's own sources of income. But between 1869 and 1877, in only two years, those of 1873-74 and 1874-75, were the Revenues Conceded sufficient to cover the minimum stipulated for debt repayment. In the remaining years the Government was forced to make good the shortfall. As is evident from Table 7.8, these payments were substantial.

¹⁹ FO 335 127/2 Wood to Granville, September 18, 1872.

²⁰ *Correspondence Politique*, vol. 44.

Table 7.8 Government Payments to the International Financial Commission to assure the Repayment of Loan Liabilities

Year	Amount paid (piastres)
1870-1	5,000,000
1871-2	4,321,000
1872-3	2,500,000
1873-4	2,392,964
1874-5	3,482,755

Source : Quai d’Orsay, *Correspondence Politique*, vol 44.

In fact the years when Government contributions were required were those marked by economic distress. The explanation for this is not difficult to find: many of the Commission’s revenues, particularly its most important single source of income, the tax on exports, were heavily dependent on the state of agriculture. When agriculture was depressed the whole basis for trade was greatly undermined causing a sharp reduction in the Commission’s revenues. It could hardly be otherwise given the economy’s overwhelming dependence on agriculture.

The problem for the Bey was that his own government’s income was similarly affected. Of its five main sources of revenue, only that of the mahsoulats, or tax farming concessions, mainly granted in the towns, could be considered anything remotely close to stable since they were sold to individuals at auction at the start of each year. Even in this case it is true to say that their value would decline considerably after successive years of bad harvests or low agricultural output in general. Of the others, the dime, or tax on grain production, the kanoun on the olive harvest (partly destined to the government) and the income generated from land belonging to the government (the Royal Domain) varied directly with the state of the harvests.

The last, and by far the most important, was the medjba, or capitation tax, which, while theoretically fixed, would in practical terms also fluctuate since the population’s

ability to pay was directly related to their economic well-being.

The Bey, then, having to procure additional funds at a time when revenues were at their weakest, was caught in a financial stranglehold. The political ramifications which a default on its obligations to its major foreign creditors entailed, were a constant preoccupation.

It is therefore easy to see the attractions of an increased export tax. Alone amongst the country's agricultural resources, alfa grass was resistant to, even flourished under, drought conditions under which circumstances it not only provided a means of ensuring subsistence for the tribes but also enhanced their ability to pay taxes. The payment of the medjba together with the duties raised on exports bolstered flagging government revenues in years when other commercial activities were in decline. In 1881, for example, the export duty on alfa alone raised 691,009 piastres which represented nearly one third of total export duties earned.²¹

Of course the decision to raise the level of taxation was based on the belief that the collection and exportation of alfa were largely unaffected by government charges. This view was supported by historical precedent, the reduction of the duty in 1872 having, according to government statistics at least, no impact on export volume, but merely resulted in lower tax revenue (see Table 7.9 and Figure 7.2).

Nor for that matter did the increase in 1876 have any braking effect on the trade in general, the subsequent years to 1881 being the most successful in the short history of the Tunisian alfa trade. But, as discussed above, these were years of low rainfall, poor crops and pasture and of general commercial malaise. The alfa trade was able to pass on additional costs to a population deprived of other means of income in the form of lower prices. During the 1880's however, British market prices for alfa fell dramatically as a result of improvements in the treatment and adoption of wood pulp

²¹ AGT, Serie E, 76/1. "Douanes", Rapport du M. Paul Cambon. Export duties raised in 1881/1882 were 2.2 million piastres.

in the manufacture of paper. As prices fell, margins throughout the producer regions came under increasingly heavy pressure.

Table 7.9 Alfa Exports and Taxes Received, 1871-1881

Year	Tons	Export duty raised (piastres)	Period
1871	4,181	45,573	July - December, 1871
1872	9,907	132,965 ²²	January - December, 1872
1873	10,063	106,239	January - December, 1873
1874	9,814	91,489	January - December, 1874
1875	11,727	116,815	January - December, 1875
1876	21,820	253,135 ²³	January - December, 1876
1877	15,070	317,464	January - June, 1877
1878	n/a	n/a	n/a
1879	17,627	409,928	October 1878 - October 1879
1880	24,153	580,196	October 1879 - October 1880
1881	28,903	691,009	October 1880 - October 1881
1882	12,497	301,722	October 1881 - October 1882
1883	12,395	290,651	October 1882 - October 1883
1884	21,649	489,812	October 1883 - October 1884
1885	17,998	448,312	October 1884 - October 1885
1886	15,157	364,110	October 1885 - October 1886
1887	13,562	321,537	October 1886 - October 1887

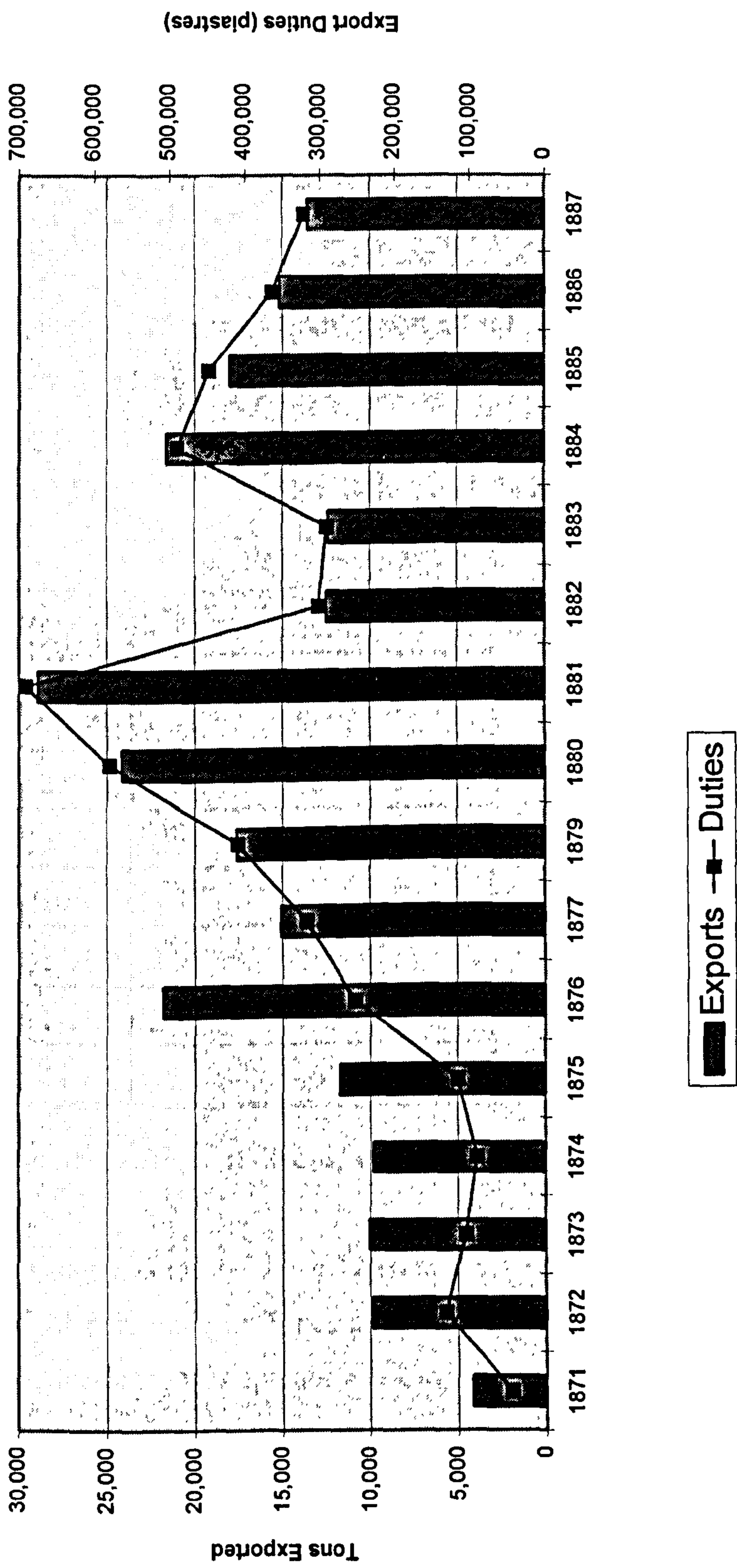
Source: 1871-1877 Inspection Generale des Finances a MAE, August 27, 1877, *Correspondence Politique*, vol. 44.

1878-1887 AGT, E76/1, *Releve statistique des exportations d'alfa effectuee dans la Regence de Tunis de 1878 a 1887*.

²² Duty lowered from 1 piastre/quintal to 1/2 p/qt by end of 1872.

²³ Duty raised to 1-1/2 per quintal in Susa; 1 p/qt in Sfax and southern ports.

Alfa Exports and Export Duties Raised 1871-1887



7.7 The Impact of Price Reduction on the Geography of the Alfa Trade

From 1883 the fall in the value of alfa in Britain was continuous and the pressure on production costs in all the supplier countries became serious. This created severe problems even in Algeria. Table 7.10 shows the cost of a tonne of alfa before shipment to the coast from the Departments of Oran and Constantine. Even with the very low prices paid to collectors (which the system of monopoly concessions facilitated), the profit to the merchant, on an f.o.b. selling price at the quai of 70 francs, was a maximum of 25 francs from which all transportation costs, by railway or beast of burden, had to be deducted.

Table 7.10 Costs of Production in Algeria in 1890, before Transportation to the Coast (francs)

	Oran	Constantine	
		Tebessa	Batna & Setif
Purchase	25	25	25
Loss in drying	6	6	6
Handling costs	10	8	8
Rent of land	1-1½	3	2½
General costs	1-1½	3	5
Total	44	45	46½

Source: Association de l’Afrique du Nord, (1890) p. 12.

The final profit accruing was rarely above 12 francs, usually lower, and was reported to be as low as 3F90 per tonne at Tebessa.²⁴ One report even suggested that the Compagnie Franco-Algerienne was operating at a loss when the true costs of its railway were accounted for.

²⁴ Association de l’Afrique du Nord, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

"Cette societe a la charge d'un chemin de fer qui, si je suis bien informe, laissee une insuffisance de recettes de 1,000,000 francs par an. Pour combler ce deficit chaque tonne d'alfa sur les 40,000 exportees doit payer 25 francs outre ses frais de transport".²⁵

In Tripolitania, too, described as the "champ du bataille du commerce de l'alfa"²⁶ because of its low cost base and high production volume, losses were sustained in 1890 with only a slight improvement in 1891.²⁷ The reason, ironically, was "principally due to the hydraulic press packing establishment...here being too numerous for the requirements of the trade".²⁸

Table 7.11 Costs per Tonne of Alfa Exported from Sfax in 1885

	Cost in French francs
Collection	37.50
Pressing	12.50
Export tax	13.50
Freight to the U.K.	18.25
Total costs	82.25

Source : Association de l'Afrique du Nord, (1890), p. 12.

In Tunisia the problems posed by falling world market prices had become no less serious. Table 7.11 shows the estimated costs per tonne of alfa shipped from Sfax in 1885. To this had to be added transportation costs from the interior to the ports of embarkation (and in the case of Sousse, a further 8 francs in export duty):

²⁵ MAE, *Correspondence Politique*, vol. 88, M. le Resident General a Tunis a M. le Ministre des Affaires Etrangeres, December 21, 1885.

²⁶ *Ibid.*.

²⁷ *BPP*, (1892), LXXIV. Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tripoli for the Year 1891.

²⁸ *Ibid.*.

"The decline in the value of esparto has been continuous and has now reached so low a point as to be barely remunerative, being only £3 12 shillings a ton. As the export duty amounts to 12 shillings a ton and 17 shillings a ton according to the fineness of the fibre it is not surprising that the falling off in the value of the trade should have amounted to more than 40%.²⁹

Yet in 1885 Tunisian grass was selling for 125 francs per tonne in Britain. By 1892 its prices had fallen to 80 francs per tonne.³⁰

Table 7.12 Tunisian Alfa Exports by Port 1886-1896 (tons)

Year	Susa	Sfax	Gabes	Other	Total
1886	772	7,753	1,997	1,853	12,375
1887	775	6,351	2,365	4,362	13,824
1888	1,015	8,364	2,742	9,147	21,268
1889	2,365	7,747	4,112	10,395	25,159
1890	1,549	5,007	4,943	9,170	20,695
1891	395	2,170	4,889	6,975	14,429
1892	1,013	3,891	6,456	7,543	18,903
1893	778	1,515	4,504	6,830	13,630
1894	822	1,015	4,453	8,059	14,349
1895	964	1,115	4,001	4,654	10,734
1896	709	921	5,535	7,478	14,643

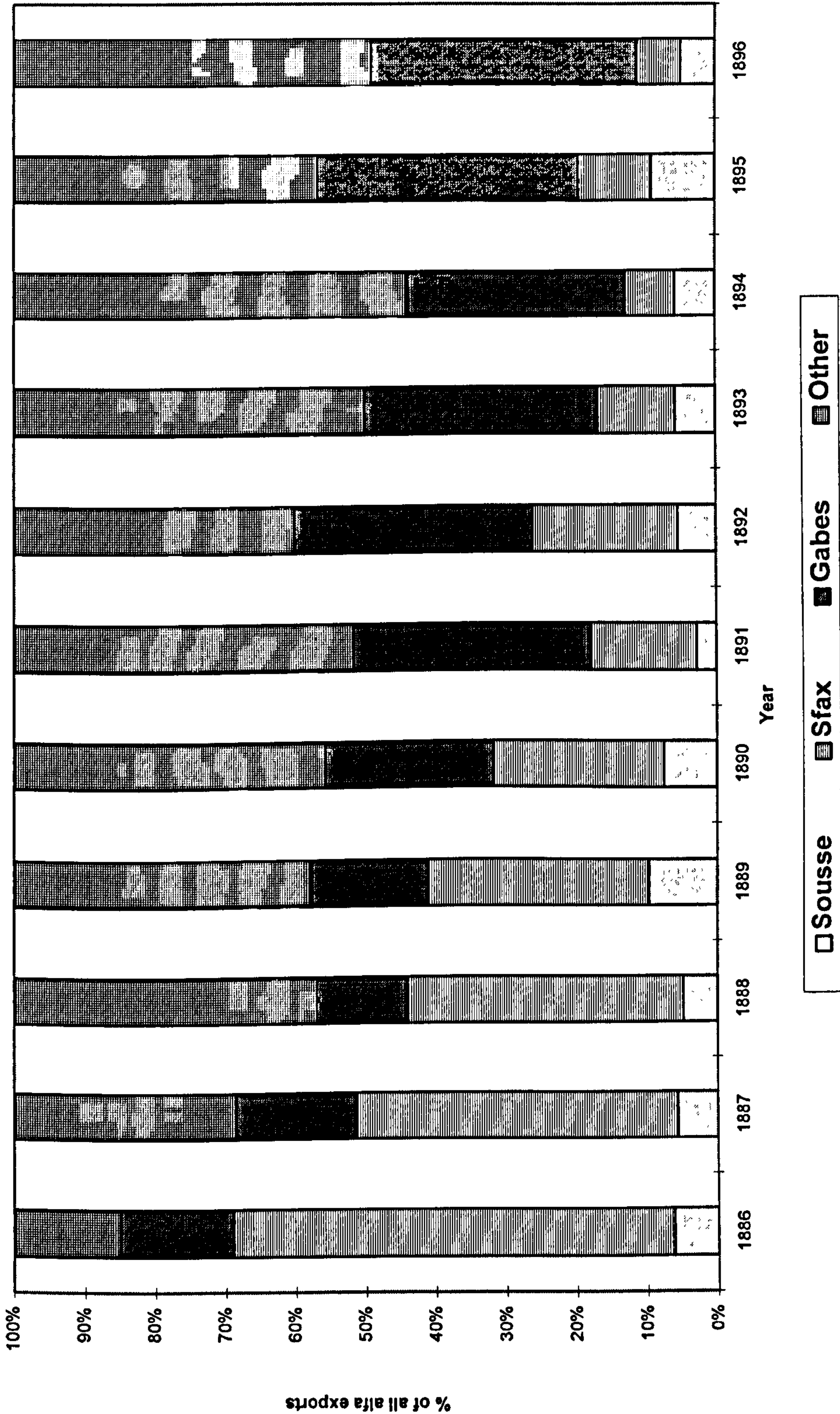
Source : Regence de Tunis, Protectorat Francais, Statistiques Commerciales, *op. cit.*, Annees 1886-1896.

A measure of the seriousness of the situation is provided by the example of the Franco-English Company which as far back as 1883, had promised potential investors that the laying down of a railway line and of hydraulic presses would enable it to deliver grass to Liverpool at £3 18 shillings per ton against the prevailing market rate

²⁹ Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tunis for the Year 1886.

³⁰ La Depeche Tunisienne, September 14, 1897. "L'alfa tunisien".

Tunisian Alfa Exports by Port as % of Total Alfa Exports 1886-1896



at that time of £7 5 shillings.³¹ By the 1890's the market price for Tunisian grass had reached this level yet neither the railway nor hydraulic presses had been erected. Indeed uncertainty over the future prospects of price and volume requirements in the British market, because of the rapid increase in consumption of wood pulp, discouraged merchants from investing large amounts of capital in projects which would undoubtedly have reduced the cost base. Margins were too tight and volume insufficient to enable the amortisation of such an investment.

The only concession the government made was the reduction in January, 1888 of the export tax levied at Sousse to that prevailing in the southern ports.³² But the trade at Sousse had already all but disappeared during the 1880's, and neither the reduction in taxes nor even the drought of 1888 could revive its flagging fortunes (see Table 7.12 and Figure 7.3).³³

With prices at a minimum the collection of alfa became concentrated in areas near to the coast where transportation costs could be kept down:

"Toutes les tribus du centre, Zlass, Madjer et Hammama ont du renoncer a l'exploitation de leur resource naturelle car leur eloignement de la cote ferait absorbe par le transport de l'alfa tout a benefice qu'elle pourrait en tirer".³⁴

The Perry Bury company noted, in a letter to Richard Wood in 1887, that:

"Whilst the fine grasses of Susa has been gradually disappearing from the English market the exportation of coarser grasses shipped at Sfax and Gabes has largely increased as the superiority of the quality to Tripolitanian grasses is recognised".³⁵

³¹ *The Times*, January 17, 1883, "Esparto Fibre for Papermaking".

³² MAE, Memoires et Documents, Dossier 6, Decree of January 29, 1888.

³³ Although of the alfa exports classified in "Other" in Table 8.10 2,212 tons in 1888 and 200 tons in 1889 came from the Caidat of Souessi, near Sousse, which would normally have been attributed as exports from Sousse.

³⁴ Proces-Verbaux de la Conference Consultative, 1891, p. 33.

³⁵ FO 335/144/2, Perry Bury to Wood, Susa, November 9, 1887.

In fact by the early 1890's, even the trade at Sfax had fallen into a steep decline. While in 1886 the port accounted for over 60% of the country's total alfa exports, by 1896 this had declined to only six percent. During the period 1886-1890 the value of alfa exported was 25% of Sfax's total exports. Between 1891 and 1896 alfa grass represented less than five percent of the port's exports by value.

Yet if Sfax declined in importance as a port of shipment, not all the tribes of the centre which had previously supplied the town stopped collecting grass as the Conference Consultative had implied. Many undoubtedly did, unwilling to accept lower prices being offered for the time involved (or in the cases where animals had to be rented from other people, unable to sustain the cost incurred). But others began to take alfa across the border to Tebessa in Algeria. Thus in 1889 Alexander Cau, ex-magistrate in Tebessa, established an alfa yard at the town which received deliveries from the districts around Kasserine, Sbeitla and Feriana. Much of this was supplied by the Ouled Ouzez fraction of the Hammama tribe which also took grass to the southern ports of Tunisia.³⁶ In 1888, which was a extremely bad year for crops and pasture in the south, the Ouled Ouzez, the Ouled Sidi Abid, the Ouled Ali, Ouled Hidge, Ouled Sidi Tlil and Ouled Nadji, all sold alfa in Algeria despite the fact that the prices offered were as low as 3 F for 100 kg.³⁷

Other tribes simply switched their supplies to ports closer to them irrespective of the price being offered. Many of the Hammama tribesmen, instead of taking their grass to Sfax, began to patronize the ports of Skhira and Gabes. Between 1886 and 1889,

³⁶ AGT, Serie E 79/1, Various Correspondence. Cau paid only 2 F 83 per 100 kg including import duties into Algeria. Despite the very low prices offered, the transportation to Tebessa was less time consuming.

³⁷ All these tribes complained of the need to pay the export duty on the alfa they took to Algeria which "absorberaient les fonds et les interets". The Director des Finances replied to these mentioning "Quioque cette situation merite d'etre prise en consideration mais en repondant a cette demande ou s'engagerait a repondre a plusieurs autres de ce genre adresees recemment par plusieurs caids de la Regence". Again the Direction des Finances was concerned of the effect on budgetary receipts resulting from a reduction, or moratorium, of export duties. See various letters in AGT Serie E, Carton 16, Dossier 5.

Gabes and those ports classified under the heading, "Other", which was principally Skhira, accounted for nearly 52% of the country's total alfa exports. During the years 1890-1896 this figure had risen to nearly 80%.

The centre of gravity moved southward as the pressure of price took on greater significance. Environmental conditions were more marginal in the far south than they were in the high steppe where the tribes could also count on finding work and pasture in the Tell. In addition the grass in the south grew nearer the coast and caused less disruption to traditional transhumance movements which often took the tribes northward and close to the port of Gabes. Camels too were much more abundant in the south than they were in the high steppe, itself a reflection of the more difficult climatic and environmental conditions.

Table 7.13 The Principal Exports of Gabes as a Percentage of the Ports Total Exports by Value 1892-1896

Article	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896
Alfa grass	70	58	38	46	64
Wheat	1	-	9	11	-
Barley	5	-	33	13	-
Woollen goods	9	15	12	14	17
Animal skins	2	6	2	4	5
Dates	2	2	4	8	2

Source : Regence de Tunis, Protectorat Francais, Statistiques Generales..., *op. cit.*, Annees 1892-1896

As the possibility of a resurgence in the alfa trade at Sousse and Sfax ebbed during the late 1880's and 1890's alfa merchants increased their activities in the far south. William Galea, manager of Perry Bury's Tunisian operations, had to ask increasingly for more leave of absence from his post as Vice-consul at Sousse because "...more than ever my business is calling me to the south as the esparto trade is nearly disappeared

at Susa".³⁸

As a result during these years alfa grass became ever more important to the economy of the southern districts. At Gabes (Skhira was almost entirely a centre for shipment of alfa, exporting little else and importing almost nothing) it accounted for up to 70% of total exports, the only other items of any significance being barley in years of good crops, and woollen goods (see Table 7.13).

To some extent, dependence on alfa grass as a source of income for the southern tribes may have been a product of increasing commercialisation. Between 1886 and 1896 the foreign trade at Gabes increased by nearly 120% from 1,248,277 francs to 2,739,038 francs. The development of external trade and of internal commercialization of the economy was strongly promoted by French authorities, particularly the military, which it regarded as a means both of economic development and of achieving political stability. To promote security and in an attempt to fix the semi-nomadic populations in a defined territorial space close to military and administrative centres, the French created a number of local markets at strategic parts throughout the south. New markets were created at Medenine, Tatahouine and Ben Gardane in the far south as well as at other points further north to act as centres for the sale and purchase of goods.

With the introduction of tax payments in money rather than goods from 1894, produce sales of animals, grain, olives and other goods at these markets increased markedly.³⁹ Despite, perhaps partly because of this, the trade balance deteriorated during the 1890's.⁴⁰

During the 1890's purchases of refined cereal products such as flour and of luxury

³⁸ FO 335 177/7, Galea to Drummond-Hay, Sfax, June 17, 1892.

³⁹ Fozzard, A. (1988) p. 91.

⁴⁰ The trade deficit at Gabes averaged over 560,000 francs between 1890 and 1896. The value of alfa exports averaged 507,000 francs during the same period. Regence de Tunis, Protectorat Francais, Statistiques Commerciales, *op. cit.*, 1892-1896.

items such as "denrees coloniales", i.e. tea, coffee, sugar and tobacco, increased. The importation of the latter rose from 89,248 francs in 1886 to 544,146 francs by 1896. Similarly imports of flour grew from 16,231 francs to 346,608 francs during the same period. In 1896, these two classifications of products made up nearly 50% of Gabes's imports.

Does this indicate a significant change in local consumption patterns? This is difficult to say with any certainty. Certainly much of the increased imports of luxury items were then re-exported by caravan to the Sahelian regions to the south.⁴¹ Some too would have been consumed by the French officials garrisoned or stationed in the south. This may explain how part of the trade deficit was financed, as would the scale of the contraband trade in these items and in arms.

It is, however, unlikely that alfa grass stimulated a change in the consumption patterns of the tribes of the south, at least during the nineteenth century.⁴² In fact, alfa grass continued to be the resource of the poor and the increases in collections of the material in the south more a reflection of greater activity on the part of the merchants. Prices offered for the collection of alfa fell considerably. If, according to Table 7.9. the tribes were paid 3 F 75 per 100 kg of grass by 1900 this had fallen to only 1 F 50 at Sened.⁴³ Lower prices may, perversely, have stimulated collections amongst the very poor who had little alternative source of income although they were undoubtedly a disincentive to many tribesmen.

As prices fell, concern for those who by necessity habitually collected and sold the

⁴¹ Caravans took 1,195,700 kilos of sugar and 5,500 kilos of coffee to the Algerian Sahara in 1897. E. Fallot, (1899), p. 18.

⁴² Fozzard, A. (1988) p. 99. Fozzard notes that it may have had more of an influence in the twentieth century as addiction to tea, for example, became more widespread.

⁴³ Fleury, V., (1900), *op. cit.*, p. 69. This price was after the opening of the Sfax-Gafsa railway and exemplifies how many tribes were willing to accept lower prices if the distance of transportation to the market was reduced. Sened, supplied by the Hamamma tribes of the far west, was 150 km from Sfax.

grass as a means of subsistence, increased.

"...in consequence of the low prices ruling in Great Britain and exorbitant duty amounting to nearly 35% this important branch of trade with Great Britain has been severely damaged in the southern districts.... The decline of the trade is also prejudicial to large numbers of the nomad population who gather the grass for conveyance to merchants engaged in the business on the coast."⁴⁴

The government's failure to respond positively to repeated requests for a further reduction in the export tax was seen in many circles as proof that France was following a policy designed to favour French interests over those of other foreign nationals.

During the years 1890 and 1896, alfa had fallen to sixth place in the country's exports by value, behind wheat, olive oil, barley, tree bark, live animals and only just ahead of wine. In sharp contrast to alfa, these goods had benefitted from either a reduction or elimination of export duties and had further gained by the conditions of the new customs law of 1890 which allowed significant quantities of cereals and other goods to enter France free of import duties. Alfa grass, traded by British merchants and shipped almost entirely to Britain, continued to suffer a duty representing around 30% of its value:

"France does not give any encouragement to the trade by a reduction of duty because it is seen to be one of the few branches of exports in British hands and also because the nomad population who are the main sufferers cannot make their requirements be listened to."⁴⁵

There is undoubtedly an element of truth in this and some members of the Conference Consultative (an advisory body, much like a Chamber of Commerce, composed of foreign nationals) spoke out to this end during its inaugural meeting at which the problems of the alfa trade were addressed.⁴⁶ One member, however, pointed out that, "On a dit que l'alfa va en Angleterre, mais il ne faut pas oublier que la benefice

⁴⁴ Report on the Trade and Commerce of Tunis for the Year 1891.

⁴⁵ FO 335 177/7 Commercial Report for Susa for the Year 1892.

⁴⁶ *Procès-Verbaux* (1891) *op. cit.*.

economique est pour celui qui vend et non pas pour celui qui recoit".⁴⁷

There is no doubt that lower prices were beginning to affect the Arab collectors of the grass who relied on it for much needed income. But the Director of Finances viewed a possible reduction in export duties as a question of fiscal resources:

"La commission indique que l'alfa devra etre l'un des premiers produits degreves; il accepte cette situation. Mais il s'agirait d'un degrevement qui calcule sur les exercices 1305, 1306, 1307 (1888, 1889, 1890) monterait a 290,000 piastres et il faut evidemment tenir compte de la situation budgetaire."⁴⁸

Although agreeing to the need for a reduction of taxes, the Director of Finances did not agree that the benefits from this would necessarily flow through to the people who needed it most, but that it would simply add to the profits of the merchants. Nevertheless pressure continued to mount for a reduction of duties in the late 1890's not simply from the merchants, but also on behalf of the tribes:

"Depuis assez longtemps, les populations du Sud Tunisien reclamaient une detaxe qui donnait des facilites plus grandes a l'exportation de l'alfa si justement appelee 'la resource des nomades pauvres'".⁴⁹

It was only in 1897 that the Director of Finances finally agreed to a reduction from 1F 27 to 0F 50 per metric quintal a move which, at last, brought the Tunisian alfa trade into line with those in Algeria and Tripolitania. Though the merchants had, for many years, called for reductions in the export duty as a pre-requisite to levelling the competitive playing field, the implementation of lower tariffs in 1897 failed to stimulate the Tunisian alfa trade as many had hoped.⁵⁰ While shipments rose from 14,886 tonnes in 1896 to 18,186 tonnes in 1897 and 24,442 tonnes in 1898 by 1899 they had

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴⁹ *La Depeche Tunisienne*, February 27, 1897.

⁵⁰ *La Depeche Tunisienne* of September 14, 1897 reported that with the tax reduction there was good reason to believe that "cette industrie [alfa] va renaitre".

fallen back to 14,157 tonnes.⁵¹

7.8 Conclusion

Alfa grass remained one of Tunisia’s foremost exports during the late 1880’s and 1890’s much as it had in the late 1870’s. Between 1886 and 1896 alfa grass never ranked below 8th amongst the country’s principal items of export, a remarkable achievement for an article of such low unit value. (see Table 7.14)

Table 7.14 Alfa Exports by Value (Francs) 1886-1896, as % of Total Exports and Ranking Relative to Country’s Principal Exports

Year	Alfa Grass	Total Exports	Alfa as a percentage of total	Rank
1886	1,509,072	19,211,387	7.86	4
1887	1,686,636	20,351,736	8.29	4
1888	2,160,800	16,616,396	13.00	3
1889	2,556,150	20,918,785	12.21	2
1890	2,100,020	37,396,723	5.61	4
1891	1,466,320	39,343,174	3.73	6
1892	1,920,510	37,202,504	5.16	6
1893	1,386,080	29,685,323	4.67	5
1894	1,457,870	36,932,766	3.95	5
1895	1,091,320	40,579,703	2.69	8
1896	1,488,640	34,507,532	4.31	7

Source: Regence de Tunis, Protectorat Francais, Direction Generale des Finances, Direction des Douanes (1897) Statistiques Commerciales de la Tunisie, Annees 1886-1896.

There were, however, clear signs of stagnation in the alfa trade during the late nineteenth century exports, in volume terms, levelling off at around 14,000 tons and increasingly significantly only in years of widespread drought.

⁵¹ L’Exploitation et le Commerce de l’Alfa en Tunisie, *Bulletin de l’Agriculture et du Commerce*, no 16, July, 1900.

But even under these conditions the scale of the trade never approached either the production capacity of the land nor the level of exports achieved in either Algeria or Tripolitania. While in Algeria in 1893 there were 161 alfa yards in operation there were just 12 in Tunisia.⁵² Export volume represented scarcely ten percent of the country's production potential of between 200,000 and 300,000 tonnes.

International market conditions were certainly influential in the relatively poor performance of the Tunisian alfa trade. British consumption of alfa grass declined in the late nineteenth century mainly because of the increasing adoption of wood-pulp in the manufacture of paper and paper products. As a result competition amongst the alfa producing countries intensified and the value of alfa in the British market fell steeply.

Although the fall in the value of alfa, the imposition of high government charges and the stubborn maintenance of an excessive export duty on alfa limited the profit margins of Tunisian merchants and restricted their ability to offer higher prices to collectors, there is little evidence that the burden of these high local costs had any significant or far-reaching impact on the overall scale of the trade in Tunisia. Even when the export duties were reduced there was no noticeable rise in the level of exports. Nor indeed is there anything to show that higher prices offered to collectors had any real, direct, impact on the scale of collections. In fact the prices offered the tribes in Tunisia were consistently higher than those in neighbouring Algeria and Tripolitania where merchants margins were also much reduced with the declining market value of alfa.

The real determinants of the size of the alfa trade in all the producer countries of north Africa were the degree of economic distress amongst the potential labour force and the difficulties of transportation to the point of sale.

In Tripolitania where environmental conditions in the main alfa districts were more severe than in most of Tunisia and Algeria drought, crop failures and lack of pasture were a much more common condition of the pastoral existence. Alfa played an

⁵² Fleury, V., (1900), *op. cit.*, p. 64.

enormously important role in maintaining economic and social equilibrium. The distance of the alfa districts from the coast was also less, particularly after the opening of the little port of Zleiten. The camel was much more common in Tripolitania and the seasonal migrations of transhumance often took the tribes northward towards the more fertile areas along the coast.

In Algeria alfa grass was first exploited near to the coast in the Oran district but when these resources began to suffer exhaustion the granting of concessions and the construction of railways facilitated the exploitation of the most important alfa regions in the high plateaux.⁵³ Concessions gave merchants a monopoly on the purchases and helped assure a stable volume of collection which justified the investment in hydraulic presses and railways.

In Tunisia the stagnation of the alfa trade in the nineteenth century can be attributed to the social and economic viability of the tribal society in general and to the disruption which long distance transportation caused to the pastoral way of life. The tribes' main concern, after their own subsistence, was the well-being of their animals. Their seasonal migrations in search of pasture took them northward to the climatically more favoured northern provinces where work could also be found in the harvest. Diverting animals and men on a long trip eastward to the coast, a return journey of up to eight days during which, particularly in years of drought, pasture could never be assured, was a poor incentive for the meagre reward offered from the sale of alfa.

The availability of animals and the distance and time involved in taking the grass long distances to the coast for sale was a more important inhibiting factor to the more widespread participation of the semi-nomads in the alfa trade than was price. In the high steppe camels were relatively scarce, Jean Poncet estimating around 9,000

⁵³ The railway from Souk-Ahras to Tebessa in the Department of Constantine near the Tunisian frontier was completed in May 1888 and gave a new impetus to the alfa trade in this region which had hitherto been stunted by the cost of land transport. The railway provided the grasses of Constantine a means with which to compete with those of Oran. Fleury, V., (1900), *op. cit.*, p. 65.

amongst the tribes of the Fraichiche and Madger in 1885.⁵⁴ This obviously placed limitations on the potential volume of collections.

Although the value of, or the price paid for, alfa grass was seldom the principal determinant in engaging in the alfa trade the fall in prices from the mid 1880's did have an effect on collections in Tunisia. For those who had to rent animals from third parties the cost of doing so began to outweigh the income earned from the collection and sale of grass. In fact the cost of transport was often higher than the amount paid for the collection of grass. Thus while some of the tribes of the high steppe such as the Ouled Sidi Tlil, Ouled Abid and Ouled Ouezzezz continued to sell alfa either on Tunisian markets or in those of Algeria which were closer, most desisted from trading in alfa except under extreme economic duress.⁵⁵

As a result the collection of alfa grass became limited to the very poor, or those living near, or with easier access to, the coast. The merchants changed their commercial emphasis to concentrate on the southern regions where their presence and activity increased during the 1880's. Indeed while the grass of the high steppe all but disappeared from coastal markets, that from the south increased. Not only were camels more abundant amongst the southern tribes but their seasonal transhumance generally took them northward close to Gabes. Environmental conditions were also more difficult in the south, rainfall being lower and less regular than in the high steppe and access to the Tell more difficult.

For the vast majority of tribesmen engaged in the trade, alfa continued to provide the means of subsistence and of paying taxes when alternative sources were unavailable or lacking. The decision to make tax payments in money rather than kind in 1894 obviously promoted the importance of alfa in the south but so too did the increased activity of merchants deprived of business to the north. It may also have been that

⁵⁴ Jean Poncet, *Paysages et Problemes Ruraux en Tunisie*, p. 222.

⁵⁵ Alfa grass was also collected and sold in Tunisia by tribes from Tripolitania and Algeria which came in search of work, pasture or food.

lower prices stimulated higher sales from the very poor tribes close to the coast, higher volume making up the shortfall in income.

But while the importance of alfa grass to the southern tribes increased during the late nineteenth century its importance to the general level of economic activity declined. The trade did not assume the magnitude of that of her neighbours.

This was a situation which was to change rapidly in the early years of the twentieth century with the construction of railways through the main alfa regions. This considerably reduced the social and economic barriers to the collection of alfa. But the potential labour force was also broadened by the very marked deterioration of the economic situation of the Tunisian tribes, particularly from the mid 1920's, as the old complementarity of the relationship between the tribes of the steppe and the Tell began to disintegrate. With the commercialization of the Tunisian economy of the twentieth century land under cereal culture in the north increased sharply at the expense of pasture. The Tell, which had hitherto provided a natural safety valve for the climatic insecurity of the southern tribes, became less accessible to their seasonal labour and transhumance. As a consequence alfa grass was transformed in the twentieth century from a complementary resource of last resort, into a central underpinning to the maintenance of a pastoral society become increasingly untenable both socially and economically.



No 157 GABES: Marché du Djara

Chapter 8

The Alfa Trade in the Twentieth Century

8.1 Introduction

If the Tunisian alfa trade could be described as stagnant during the nineteenth century the first half of the twentieth century was one of almost unbridled boom. British imports of alfa grass began to increase again as demand for paper products grew, and although the consumption of wood pulp expanded, paper made from alfa grass fortified its position as the prime material of choice for quality paper.

In Tunisia the construction of railways from the ports of Sousse and Sfax to the interior, crossing all the most important alfa growing districts facilitated the cost effective movement of much larger volumes of the material to the ports. By reducing the time and distance involved in the transportation of the grass from the fields where it was pulled to the point of sale the railways also widened the potential labour force. Camels or mules could be used because of the shorter distances; more journeys to the market could be made with less effort even the cost of hiring animals was made more affordable.

Yet while the new railways undoubtedly provided the engine for the trade's rapid expansion in the twentieth century the fuel came from a marked deterioration in the economic situation of the semi-nomadic tribes of south and central Tunisia. Increasing commercialization of the economy and its greater integration into the world economy accelerated social change in the northern regions where the ethnic foundation of tribal society continued to be undermined, though at a more rapid pace than in the nineteenth century. In the more fertile north production became increasingly driven by market demand, both local and foreign. The area under cereal cultivation expanded rapidly and land was transformed into a commodity, the value of which did not cease to rise until the late 1920's. Agricultural activities came to take precedence over animal husbandry and the availability of pasture declined. The requirement for seasonal labour in the harvests of the north also fell more rapidly from the 1930's with agricultural mechanization.

As a result the old symbiotic relationship between the people of the steppe and the Tell deteriorated sharply. The northern tribes became less willing, and less able, to accept the seasonal immigration of men and beasts from the southern tribes because of the threat to their crops. Access to work and pasture in the Tell, which had for centuries provided a natural safety valve for the climatic insecurity and environmental instability endured by the southern tribes, became more and more restricted and controlled by government authorities. A growing population in the south was forced to depend on the limited economic and ecological resources of their own land. Although the area under cereal cultivation increased significantly in the south, as it did in the north, much of it was on poorer land since the most of the best lands were already in use. With no development in the means of production, crop yields fell and the economic consequences of harvest failures, made more likely, were magnified. Faced with this the southern tribes which, unlike their northern counterparts, continued to rely fundamentally on animal husbandry, increased their ownership of livestock. But the reduced access to pasture in the Tell, and the diminishing availability of pasture in their own regions, made pastoralism an ever more marginal activity.

Under such circumstances the importance of alfa grass became paramount. Alfa grass was transformed, during the twentieth century, from a resource of last resort to a central pillar for the maintenance of pastoralism in southern Tunisia. Alfa grass replaced the Tell, as the principal means of survival for an economy and society rendered unsustainable when shorn of the safety net hitherto provided by the northern regions.

The collection, sale and export of alfa grass from Tunisia increased sharply during the twentieth century and as reliance on the material increased concerns were raised by the authorities about not only the effects of exhaustion of the resource through over-harvesting, but also the exploitation of the collectors by the foreign merchants.

8.2 The Construction of Railways in the South and Centre

The desire for the construction of railways linking the interior of the south and centre with the coast had been a goal of the French administration since the establishment of

the Protectorate in 1881. For many years this was motivated by political considerations, the need for rapid deployment of troops being seen as a prerequisite to peace and good order amongst the tribes. The cost of such a project was, however, deemed too high a burden for the Tunisian Treasury to sustain particularly given that the economic potential of these regions were extremely limited.

Besides the ill-fated and small-scale project of the Franco-English Company in the 1880's it was not until the discovery of huge phosphate deposits near Gafsa in 1887 that any serious discussion took place as to the possibility of constructing railways in the south. Even then it was only when the French resident General, Massicault, spoke out strongly on the importance of the phosphate reserves to the country in 1890 that any real attempts at securing finance for the project was made.¹ Rather than underwrite the cost of building a railway to the coast the French Administration offered the line to private capital and the project was finally awarded to the Compagnie de Gafsa formed by an amalgamation of the Banque Mirabaud and the Compagnie Mokta el Hadad. The Compagnie de Gafsa was to build the line entirely at their own cost and risk.

The choice of the railhead at the coast, which offered immense direct and indirect economic benefits to the successful bidder, gave rise to an intense competition amongst the towns of Sfax, Gabes and Skhira. Although the Government was not to finance the cost of the new line it had an important say in the final choice of the route. As a railway would confer significant benefits to landowners close to it, the Administration sought to ensure that the line crossed land which had the potential for settling French colonial agriculturalists. Neither Gabes, which was anyway unattractive because of the high costs involved in constructing adequate port facilities, nor Skhira which had excellent potential for a port, offered any real possibility of Colonial agriculture.² In

¹ Douggi, N. (1983) p. 14.

² A port at Gabes could only be constructed with great difficulty and at a high cost: "la cote est uniee, tous les vents apportent du sable et la presence d'un oued est un inconvenient de plus. Sans doute on pourrait, a coup d'argent, y constituer un port de toutes pieces, mais les sacrifices necessaires ne seraient pas pour l'heure en rapport

the end Sfax, which was anyway the largest of the towns with the best organised group of lobbyists, was chosen mainly because of the 300,000 hectares of land close to the town which was already under development for French settlement.

The first stone of the station at Sfax was laid in April 1897, and only two years later, in 1899, the 246 km of line between the port and Metlaoui, where the phosphates were mined, was officially opened.

In 1905 the line was extended to Redeyef, close to the Algerian border and some 45 km from Metlaoui, after the discovery of rich phosphate reserves there the previous year.³ In 1912 Tozeur, an oasis in the Djerid and the country's principal source of date production, was linked to Metlaoui by which time the Compagnie de Gafsa controlled a network some 365 km in length.

In 1902 further phosphate reserves were found at Moulares only 20 km from the line Metlaoui-Redeyef but in according the Compagnie de Gafsa the exploitation rights, the Administration stipulated that these resources had to be shipped, as with those from the mine at Redeyef, to the port of Sousse via a line which was to be constructed from that port to Moulares. This railway, of 310 km in length, had little economic justification, since it crossed land devoid of mineral wealth and occupied by tribes which participated only marginally in the economy at large.⁴ By ensuring that the phosphates of Moulares be shipped to the coast at Sousse on the new line, the Administration hoped this would help offset the costs of the project and provide a reasonably assured income to the

avec les avantages obtenus". *Ibid.*, p.16. In later years the land of the Mehedba, as with other habuous properties near Skira, were given over, in part, to French colonization.

³ The phosphate reserves at Redeyef were richer than those at Metlaoui.

⁴ Because of this the railway from Sousse to the interior was funded by the Government rather than private capital.

operator, the Compagnie Bone-Guelma.⁵

The railway from Sousse, which was already operating to Kairouan, was extended to Feriana in the high steppe in 1908 and to Moulares in 1910. The completion of this line resulted in the connection of most of the country into a cohesive rail network which was to link to the Algerian rail system at Tebessa.

8.3 The Alfa Trade in the Twentieth Century

The construction of the Sfax-Gafsa and the Sousse-Feriana railways heralded a new era in the Tunisian alfa trade. The railways crossed the most important alfa growing regions of the country and allowed a mass movement of grass from the interior to the coast at a much lower cost than was the case with animals.⁶ More importantly for the collectors the railways meant that merchants could establish collection points, near the railways, much closer to where the grass grew diluting the problem of transport over long distances:

"on peut prévoir que l'ouverture du chemin de fer Sfax-Gafsa, qui traverse les principaux peuplements, va donner à l'exploitation de l'alfa l'importance à laquelle cette industrie ne pouvait prétendre tant qu'elle avait pour unique moyen de transport les caravanes se rendant en cinq jours environ du centre à La Skira, à Sfax, à Gabes".⁷

The Government offered alfa merchants land on either side of the Sfax-Gafsa railway

⁵ The cost of transport charged by the Compagnie Bone-Guelma on the line to Sousse, at 9F 05 per tonne in 1910, was far higher than that incurred using their own line to Sfax (2F 50 per tonne). The Compagnie de Gafsa only wanted the exploitation rights at Moulares to stop any competitor obtaining them. The start of operations at Moulares incurred many millions of Francs in costs for the company at a time when market conditions made the mine unprofitable quite apart from the additional transportation costs to bear. *Ibid.*, p. 36 and p. 41.

⁶ From the time of the construction of the Sfax-Gafsa railway direct exports of alfa grass from Gabes declined sharply. This did not mean the end of collections in the far south since much was still brought to the town and taken by lighter to Sfax. However, a new railway linking Sfax and Gabes, built after World War I made the exploitation of the alfa in the far south a more economic proposition.

⁷ Fleury, V. (1900), *op. cit.*, p. 65.

close to the stations where they could construct their yards for the collection and preparation of alfa before being made ready for transport to Sfax. The stations themselves (Figure 8.1) were nothing more than stop-off points where the engines could take on water, but the new alfa yards at Mizzouna (Mezouna), Sened, Maknassy and Zannouch, for example, encouraged the development of little centres of commerce and population where none previously existed. On the Sousse-Feriana line alfa yards were established at Hadjeb, Djilma, Sbeitla, Kasserine, Thelepte and Maagen bel Abbes, amongst others.⁸

The alfa yards created along the railways immensely increased the potential labour force for the collection of the grass by effectively bringing the market to where the grass grew. Journey times for most tribes were considerably reduced and for those who had to hire animals the cost of taking the grass to the new yards was much lower. Even those who had only mules but no camels could take part in the commerce.

Although the years 1902-1912 were ones of prolonged and severe drought in the south and centre of the country, the sharp rise in the level of exports during the early part of the twentieth century is testament to the importance of the railways in facilitating the collection and commercialization of alfa grass. Exports of alfa which had been only 14,000 tonnes in 1899, prior to the opening of the line from Sfax-Gafsa had, by 1907 reached 30,000 tonnes and had risen to almost 58,000 tonnes in 1914 once the Sousse-Feriana line became operational (see Table 8.1 and Figure 8.2).

Exports fell sharply during the war years when British paper production was heavily reduced and although they climbed back to 57,000 tonnes in 1920 they declined again in 1921 and 1922, a reflection of oversupply in Britain where the value of alfa fell to only £3 per tonne. With average freight rates of £2 per tonne there was no market for more grass. These were also years of excellent agricultural conditions in the south and

⁸ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Seance du Chambre Mixte de Commerce et d'Agriculture du Centre, July 2nd, 1931.

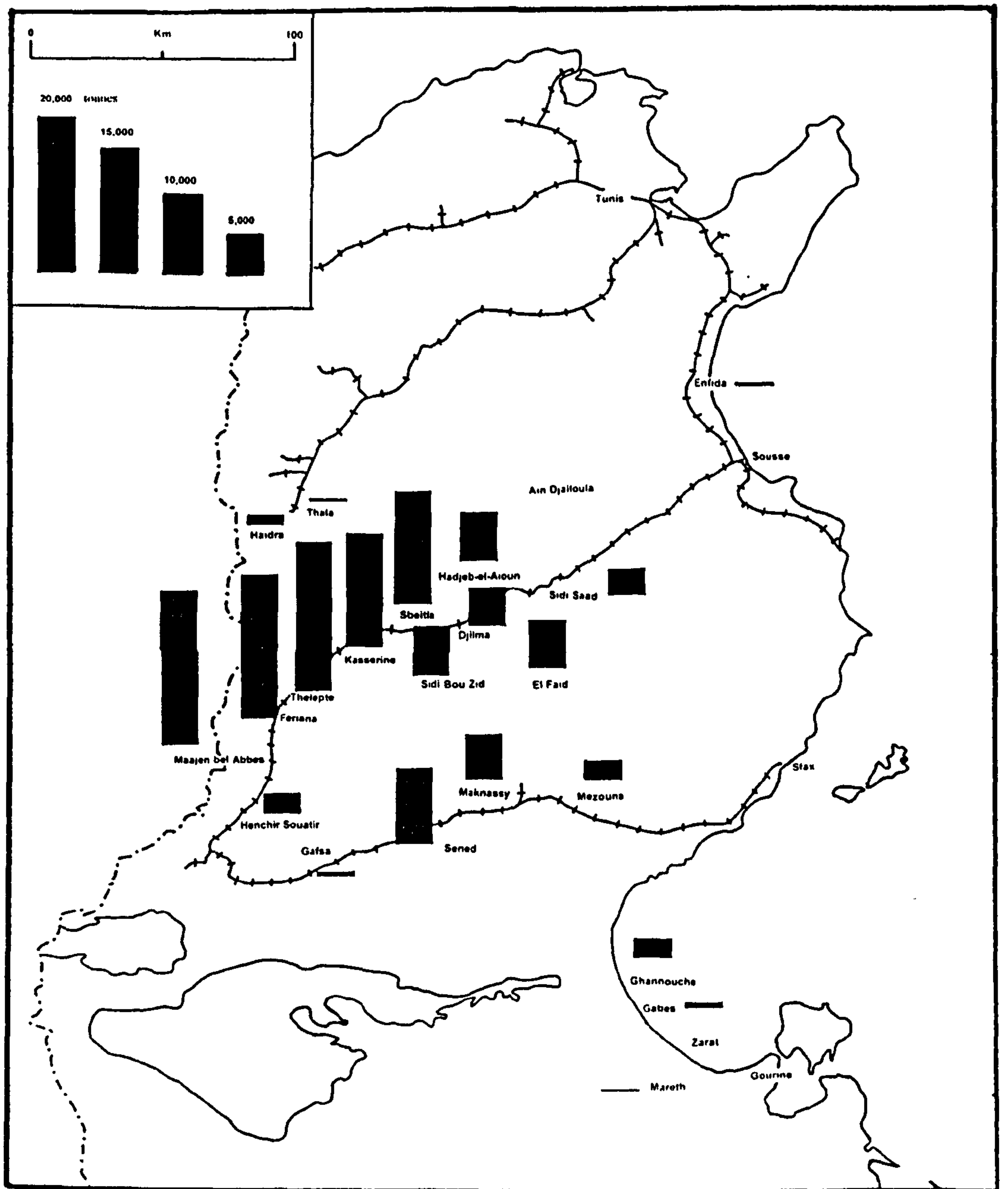


Figure 8.1. Railways and alfa markets, 1936/7. Source: see text

centre of Tunisia (although in the north of the country the crops were extremely poor).⁹ There was, therefore, little supply of alfa grass from the tribes. In the region of Thala at the end of 1921 the Controleur Civil reported stocks of 50,000 tonnes of alfa and that of the thirteen British alfa houses at Thelepte, only four kept their agents.¹⁰ Given the level of exports in the following year (20,523 tonnes) there was very little collection of grass made.

Table 8.1 Tunisian Alfa Exports 1907-1939 (Tonnes)

	Exports	Year	Exports	Year	Exports
1907	30,074	1918	2,032	1929	94,043
1908	41,634	1919	25,268	1930	76,799
1909	48,477	1920	57,206	1931	85,830
1910	38,834	1921	17,464	1932	65,960
1911	50,979	1922	20,523	1933	61,263
1912	52,514	1923	44,089	1934	84,196
1913	49,319	1924	78,089	1935	84,196
1914	57,630	1925	81,998	1936	109,403
1915	32,333	1926	89,729	1937	99,195
1916	23,932	1927	84,245	1938	129,409
1917	17,001	1928	63,769		

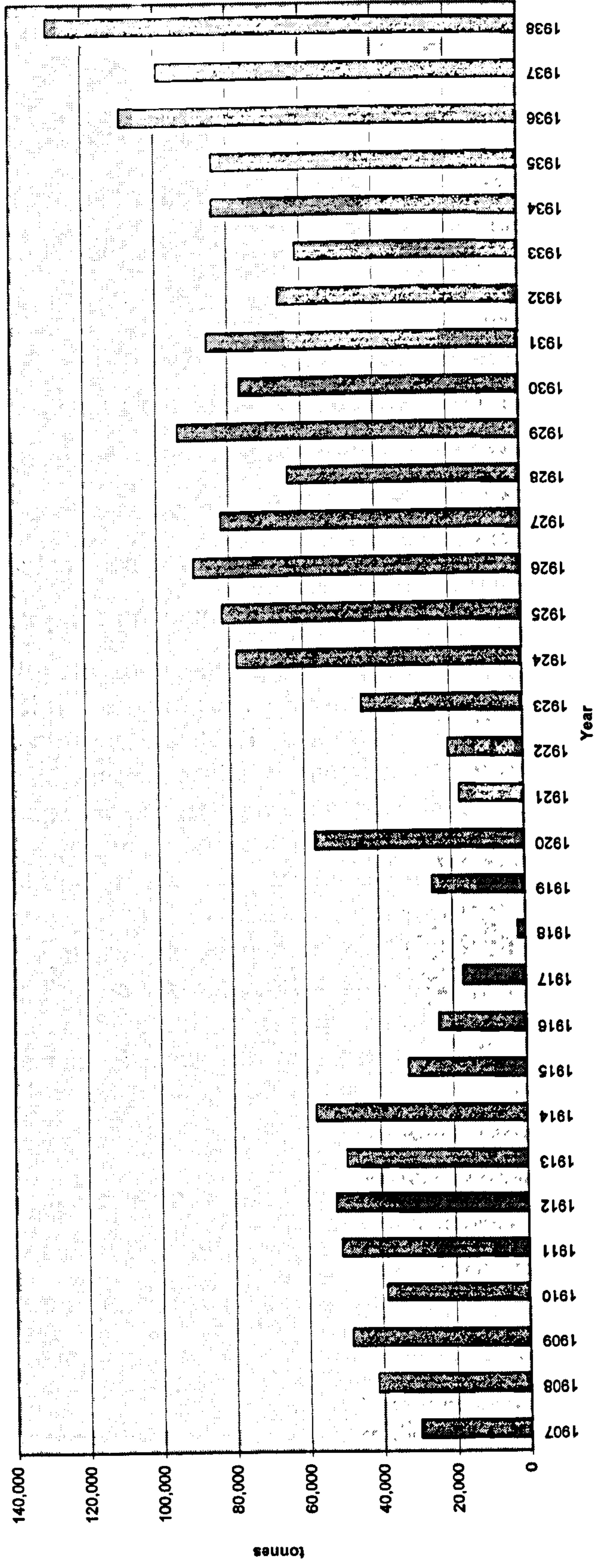
Sources : 1907-1916, L'Alfa Tunisien,(1917), (Tunis, Societe Anonyme de L'Imprimerie Rapide), p. 4.
1917-1929: Annabi, *op. cit.*, p. 26
1930-1939: Annabi, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

From the mid 1920's, however, the trend in alfa exports was clearly rising and by

⁹ The years 1920-1922 were excellent years for crops and pasture in the south while the north suffered from severe drought. See Timoumi, H. (1975) *op. cit.*, p. 159.

¹⁰ AGT Series A, carton 94, dossier 7, Controleur Civil at Thala to Resident General, December 14, 1921.

Tunisian Alfa Exports 1907-1939 (tonnes)



1938, after a slight decline during the Depression years, exports of the plant reached a new peak of 129,409 tonnes.

But the very strong growth in the scale of the alfa trade in Tunisia from the mid 1920's can not be explained simply by the existence of railways since these had been operating for some time. Undoubtedly the diversion of Tripoli's alfa to Italy had a significant impact on the supply of the British market as did stronger measures of control to avoid the exhaustion of the plant in Algeria. These occurred at a time of growing British demand for alfa grass (apart from a few years during the Great Depression) even in the face of greater competition from wood pulp.¹¹ Indeed paper made from alfa (or esparto paper as it continued to be called in Britain) did not necessarily compete directly with wood pulp papers because of the quality differential which allowed esparto papers to command a price premium in the market:

"While wood-pulp soon outstripped esparto in quantity of production, the standard of British esparto papers became a kind of idea which the wood pulp papermakers strove to imitate. In this way esparto set a standard which has had a powerful influence on the economics of British paper-making. The paper-maker and the printer both knew what could be done with esparto when wood pulp was still in its infancy, and the modern manufacturers of wood pulp and wood pulp papers owe more to the esparto standard than they may realise at the present day. At the one end of our industry we have the advocates of speed and cheapness of production, making printing papers on high speed, new machines, who follow a standard of quality which has its limits.... In this way the manufacturer of esparto papers provides a balancing factor which has always had the effect of keeping British paper-making up to a high level of excellence".¹²

While increased British consumption of alfa and the diversion of Libyan output to Italy may have enabled, much as the railways had done, an expansion in the Tunisian trade they could not, in themselves, have accounted for the sharp growth experienced in the collection of alfa amongst the tribes from the mid 1920's. As to all intents and

¹¹ British imports of alfa grass which had been 205,000 tons in 1913, had risen to 311,211 tons in 1938. See *The Paper-Maker and British Trade Journal*, (June 1957). Improvements in the processing of alfa for use in paper-making meant that, by the early 1950's one ton of paper required only one ton of alfa. *Ibid.*, p. 490.

¹² Strachan, J. (1933) *op. cit.*, p. 24.

purposes, free trade persisted in the Tunisian alfa trade (see below) during these years the increased activity in alfa collections can only be explained by either increased prices offered by the merchants or by a deterioration in the economic situation of the tribes themselves.

Rising British demand for alfa, and the effective closure of supplies from Tripolitania after the Italian occupation, pushed the F.O.B. value of Tunisian alfa up from 60 F per tonne in 1908 to 246 F per tonne in 1937.¹³ As a result prices paid to collectors in Tunisia also increased at the beginning of the twentieth century. From 1 F 50 per 100kg in 1900 the prices offered collectors had risen to 14 F by 1923 and even reached as high as 29 F in the late 1920's.¹⁴ This was, however, a period of sharply rising prices in the Tunisian economy in general grain prices more than tripling between 1914 and 1921 alone.¹⁵

But these prices for paid alfa in Tunisia are little more than indicators of what was finally received by the collectors of grass as income since all the alfa merchants employed a variety of means to reduce the net payment, i.e. what the collector took home after the sale. The tribes were often forced to pay government charges which should have been covered by the merchants, deductions for weight were made, weights were frequently understated, prices were fixed amongst buyers (see below).

In any event during the economic crisis of the 1930's when the strongest growth in exports was recorded, prices declined, apart from a brief period in 1937 when a French alfa house tried to eliminate British competition in the market by artificially inflating prices. In 1933 the tribes were being paid a maximum of 12 F for each 100 kg on the

¹³ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 1, Conservateur des Eaux et Forêts a M. le Directeur des Affaires Economiques, April 30, 1937.

¹⁴ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, "Rapport: Le Chef de Poste de Police a Controleur Civil a Thala, 1926.

¹⁵ The price of 100 kg of wheat which was between 26 and 30 F in 1914 had risen to 100 F by 1921. Mzali, M.S., (1921) p. 6.

official market at Thala and as low as 5 F 50 at private yards.¹⁶ By 1936 prices on official markets had fallen to between 6 F and 8 F.¹⁷ Many tribesmen entered into contracts to sell alfa to merchants, or agents of alfa houses, at much lower prices than these, however, during the 1930's. Thus some tribesmen of the Beni Zid agreed to rent an area of land to a M. Picard, of the Societe Franco-Tunisienne Alfatierre, for only 4 F per tonne of alfa collected, payable at every month end.¹⁸

While the decline in the "real" value of alfa undoubtedly stimulated increased collection from those for whom it provided a main source of income the "boom" from the mid 1920's was the direct result of the more general deterioration in the economic situation of the tribes of the south and centre of the country.

8.4 Development of Tunisia's Foreign Trade during the Protectorate

Although the integration of Tunisia into the international economy predated the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1881 the period of French rule witnessed a strong acceleration in this process. While before 1881 the value of foreign trade never exceeded 23 million francs, this rose sharply thereafter (See Table 8.2).

Successive legislation of the French authorities in Tunisia was designed to intensify links with the Metropolitan economy in which Tunisia was to become a source of primary, mainly agricultural, produce and a consumer of French manufactured goods. The customs law of 1890 provided for the importation into France of a variety of

¹⁶ AGT Series E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Rapport du Capitaine Boiseaux, Commandant de la Section de Sousse, May 1st, 1933 and AGT Series E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Controleur Civil de Thala to Resident General, October 9th, 1923. Prices fell further to only around 7 Francs in 1936.

¹⁷ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Conservateur des Eaux et Forets a Directeur des Affaires Economiques, April 30, 1937.

¹⁸ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, May 10, 1933. Another parcel of two lots of land was rented to M. Picard at 3 F 50 per tonne in February 1933 in the same conditions.

Tunisian goods, almost entirely agricultural produce, free of import duties.¹⁹ Of these only cereals were allowed entry free of quota restrictions.²⁰

Table 8.2. Tunisian Foreign Trade (Million Francs)

Year	Value	Year	Value
Average of 1881-9	54.5	1918	337
1898	97	1919	488
1901	104	1920	973
1902	117	1922	1300
1903	155	1924	1530
1904	160	1926	2650
1907	206	1929	3350

Source : "Notice General sur la Tunisie (1881-1921), Residence general de la Republique Francaise (Imprimerie du Centre-Toulouse) 1922-1929. Mhalla, M., *op. cit.*, p. 403.

The culmination of France's protectionist policy in this regard was the implementation in 1928 of a "Customs Union" in which trade in almost all goods between France and Tunisia were liberated from both import duties and quotas.²¹ The 1928 law, however, was aimed more at assuring French Metropolitan manufacturers a guaranteed market in Tunisia at a time of increasing protectionism in the world economy :

¹⁹ This was followed by decrees in 1904, 1914 and 1915. See "Notice General sur la Tunisie, *op. cit.*, pp. 309-310.

²⁰ (20) The decree of 1890 had a profound influence on Tunisia's trade flows. In the year 1885-1886 France accounted for only 13 % of Tunisian exports. By 1921 this had risen to 60%. "Notice General sur la Tunisie", *op. cit.*, p. 314.

²¹ This, like preceding legislation, excluded wine and salt from the benefits tax free entry into France.

"...le commerce metropolitain ne jouit pas, dans la Regence, d'une situation suffisamment privilegiee. Les importations d'origine et de provenance francaises en Tunisie, atteignent, rarement, avant la guerre 60% des importations totales alors qu'elles dépassent 80% en Algerie. Les revendications formulees a cet egard sont particulierement fondees a une epoque ou il importe a un si haut point de permettre a l'exportation francaise de creer de nouveaux debouches et de veiller a ce que la concurrence etrangere, des a present si active, ne le supplant pas sur un marche qui est legitimement devolu."²²

Tunisian imports from other countries were, in contrast, burdened with prohibitively high import duties.

Although during the 1930's the Tunisian economy was severely affected by the sharp downturn in the level and terms of her foreign trade, the 1920's was a period of rapid expansion in agricultural and mineral output. The pace of growth in exports was not too dissimilar to that experienced by imports and although the trade deficit continued to rise during the decade this was balanced by strong capital inflows mainly from France.

Grain production was, perhaps, the principal beneficiary of successive customs and trade agreements between France and Tunisia. Clearly both production and exports were affected by climatic conditions and local requirements as well as by external demand.²³ Table 8.3 shows the level of production and exports for wheat and barley between 1911 and 1920.

But the 1920's witnessed a much stronger growth in agricultural production as both internal and external demand increased and prices rose. The production of wheat and barley increased from an annual average of 3 million quintals between 1920 and 1924 to 5.1 million quintals between 1925 and 1929.²⁴

²² Notice General sur la Tunisie, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

²³ Tunisian production, even in years of good harvest, was insufficient to satisfy local requirements which gave rise to imports, usually of lower quality grains.

²⁴ M'Halla, M., *op. cit.*, p. 394.

Table 8.3. Production and Exports of Wheat and Barley 1911-1920

Year	Wheat		Barley	
	Production	Exports	Production	Exports
1911	2,350,000	611,464	2,900,000	1,315,016
1912	1,050,000	161,316	670,000	270,714
1913	2,220,000	138,405	2,050,000	834,529
1914	600,000	9,415	700,000	31,511
1915	2,250,000	155,524	1,070,000	217,951
1916	1,500,000	112,933	1,070,000	70,440
1917	1,990,000	1,412	1,700,000	70,440
1918	3,250,000	211,498	2,850,000	550,410
1919	1,900,000	863,636	1,200,000	1,397,559
1920	1,422,000	48,106	570,000	139,782

Source : "Notice General sur la Tunisie", *op. cit.*, pp. 315-316.

The general economic prosperity of the 1920's accelerated the process of commercialisation throughout the tribal regions of Tunisia but it both impacted, and was paralleled by, processes of social change which differed markedly between the climatically more favoured northern regions and the environmentally disadvantaged south and centre.

8.5 Economic and Social Change in Northern Tunisia

The marked rise in agricultural production during the 1920's was achieved, not so much by improvements in production methods, but rather by an increase in the cultivated area. More and more land was brought into agricultural production. The area of land under cultivation in 1881 was estimated to be between 700,000 hectares and 800,000 hectares.²⁵ This was exceeded by 1892 and by 1911 a little over 1 million hectares of land throughout Tunisia was devoted to agriculture. This expansion

²⁵ M'Halla, M., *op. cit.*, p. 390.

occurred in both the northern provinces and the southern and central regions of the country.

Table 8.4. Land under Cereal Cultivation in Tunisia (hectares)(annual average)

	Northern Tunisia		Southern Tunisia	
	1920-1924	1925-1929	1920-1924	1925-1929
Hard wheat	310,949	382,199	186,022	247,680
Soft wheat	45,751	63,788	534	1,932
Barley	156,197	192,183	236,290	303,723
Total	512,877	638,170	422,846	553,135

Source : M'Halla, M., *op. cit.*, p. 392.

In northern Tunisia the extension of cultures reduced the amount of pasture available for animal rearing and agriculture gradually came to supersede livestock as the principal economic activity of the tribal population. Grain production became increasingly driven by market considerations rather than subsistence needs as demand, both local and external, and prices, rose. The French created a whole series of new markets throughout the country in an effort not only to facilitate the commercialisation of produce but also with the aim of encouraging the tribes to have stronger ties to specific territorial points, something which would make the control and administration of the pastoral population easier and more effective. The traditional practice of storing excess grain resulting from good harvests as a security against the possibility of future deficits was largely abandoned.

Parallel but linked to increasing commercialisation of production, the social ties which bound the northern tribes underwent a profound transformation. More regular cultivation of land accelerated the process of tribal disaggregation and of sedentarization of the semi-nomads of the north, a process which had been underway since long before the establishment of the Protectorate. As was discussed in Chapter Two, the northern tribes had, since at least the seventeenth century, begun to establish legal titles to the

land they occupied.²⁶ At first this was at the level of the tribe in seeking to differentiate their land from those of neighbouring tribes but gradually they reached down the tribal ladder to fractions and sub-fractions of the tribe and eventually to individual families. From the late nineteenth century land became a commodity with a value which increased as its availability diminished with the establishment of titles and as its commercial potential was enhanced. Uncultivated, fertile land in the north of the country which was selling for 100 F per hectare in 1900 had risen to as high as between 1500 F and 3000 F by 1930.²⁷

Land, at least agricultural land, became increasingly identified with units smaller than that of the tribe and, instead of communal distribution and exploitation, individual or family ownership and usage developed. There was a progressive, if, to some extent, unconscious change amongst the people of the Tell from a collective identity to a more individual social consciousness, from an ethnic social base to one defined more by territorial limits. This process was further enhanced by the French Administration which, from the late nineteenth century, sought to eliminate as many ethnic cheikhats as possible replacing them with those based on geographical boundaries. Thus in the Caidat of Teboursouk of the 39 cheikhats in 1890 20 were abolished and in the Caidat of Kef 23 of the 41 cheikhats were eliminated.²⁸

The French administration's policy of appropriating land to encourage French colonization also stimulated the proliferation of property titles as tribes sought to counter the threat of eviction from land the tribes had occupied and worked for centuries.²⁹

²⁶ Monchicourt, C. (1906) p. 44.

²⁷ M'Halla, M., *op. cit.*, p. 294. The value of land was growing at a much faster rate than prices of the agricultural product of the land giving rise to land speculation on the part of native Tunisians and large foreign companies.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²⁹ Public Habous had to provide at least 2000 ha per annum for French colonization (see C. Sammut (1983)).

The policy of the French Administration in Tunisia with regards land and landownership was almost entirely dictated by the need to provide a means with which land could be transferred into the hands of French nationals, colons. For the French, existing Muslim property law was insufficient to provide the necessary security of ownership which would be required for French settlers. This was evident even in the pre-Protectorate period. When the Societe Marseillaise de Credit Industriel et Commercial bought the Enfida estate from General Kherredine objections were raised in so far as legislation requiring that neighbouring landowners be given a right of preemption on the sale was ignored.³⁰

The administration, therefore, sought to establish a clear and coherent property law which would protect indigenous landholders but which, more importantly, would facilitate the transfer of land to French settlers while providing the latter sufficient legal protection from disputes arising under Muslim law. Paul Cambon, French Resident General in Tunisia between 1881 and 1886 wrote:

"Pour attirer et retenir les capitaux il importe de proteger les acquereurs de terres contre leur ignorance de la langue, des lois et des usages du pays, de mettre les proprietaires a l'abri des revendications imprevuees, en un mot d'assurer la facilite et la securite des transactions".³¹

Originally the French had hoped that the very large properties bought by large French institutions (and politicians) would form the basis of colonization. But in fact many of these were speculative purchases much of which were sold to Italian immigrants. The failure of this "private" colonization gave way from 1892 to officially sponsored colonization in which the French Administration was to manage French settlement and provide the land and finance necessary to attract French farmers.

To achieve this the Administration had to acquire the land which could be provided to settlers. While in Algeria lands were simply confiscated and given freely to French colonizers in Tunisia a variety of means were employed to find suitable properties.

³⁰ Sammut, C. (1983) p. 87.

³¹ Cited in Sammut, C. (1983) p. 89.

Thus from 1898 the administrators of the Public Habous, i.e., lands which were given over with inalienable and perpetual rights in the name of religious foundations, had to provide at least 2000 hectares of land per year to the Direction de l'Agriculture for the needs of colonization.³² In addition, in 1896, all the "terres mortes" of the country were appropriated by the French Administration. These were deemed to include the old estates of the Bey. Until 1896 these estates did not belong to the Bey who only had the authority to grant usage rights (which transformed them into "terres vives") to his subjects. Much of these lands were already occupied by Tunisians paying rent to the owner or the principal renter who then sub-let. The effective dispossession of rights enjoyed for generations led many, in fear of seeing their land expropriated in a similar way, to establish legal ownership of their lands since traditional rights of usage were not deemed, in the case of Beylical estates, sufficient to justify continued occupation.

Prior to World War I in many cases the existing occupants of these lands were either evicted or only allowed to continue to rent land until it was allotted to colons. The needs of the native occupants of the soil were largely ignored. But from the early 1920's concerns that this policy could only result in the creation of a disaffected mass of landless labourers, gave way to a policy of "fixation au sol des indigenes".³³ Parts of the Domainal land were offered to indigenous families whom it was hoped could be transformed into small landholders. In 1921 the Secretary General of the Tunisian Government wrote:

"Que le gouvernement suive cette politique pendant les annees a venir l'agitation politique aura disparu dans les campagnes. Transformer le petit agriculteur en un petit proprietaire c'est assurer dans l'avenir a la France une population conservatrice...que se tiendra loin des aventuras".³⁴

Between 1920 and 1934 106,976 hectares of land, mainly on the state's domain, were

³² Sammut, C. (1983) p. 150. See also Cannon, B. (1985).

³³ M'Halla (1974) p. 301.

³⁴ Cited in M'Halla, M., *op. cit.*, p. 301.

allotted to native cultivators, a figure which had risen to 173,696 hectares by 1938.³⁵

8.6 The Terres Collectives

The decision to "domainalise" (or classify as State Domain) the "terres morte" gave rise to a further problem: what to do with land occupied by the tribes. Outside the State properties land which showed evidence of regular cultivation or improvement by man was deemed private even if no legal title was taken out. This was the case for almost all the land in northern Tunisia where population densities were relatively high and where climate and commercial factors encouraged a more regular agriculture and a more sedentarized population. In the south and centre of the country, however, only a very small proportion of territory could be deemed to have been regularly cultivated and hence privately owned. These regions were the preserve of extensive animal husbandry:

"Il existe a l'interieur de la Tunisie et principalement dans le Centre et le Sud...de vastes etendues de territoire sur lesquelles des tribus sedentaires ou semi-nomades exercent des droits d'usage et de jouissance. Le sol de ces territoires est depuis des siecles en la paisable possession des occupants, qui en tirant parti par la culture des cereales, le parcours des bestiaux, l'exploitation des peuplements d'alfa ou des broussailles, etc. Chaque tribu ou plus exactement chaque fraction de tribu a ainsi son territoire separe. Elle y campe, elle en utilise les terrains de parcours pour le paturage des animaux. Toutes les annees a l'epoque des pluies, les douars se transportent sur les parties du sol qui ont ete les mieux arrees, et il st, d'apres des usages immemoriaux, procede a l'occupation par les familles des parcelles susceptibles d'etre mise en valeur. Chacun laboure et ensemence son lot pour son compte personnel. Il n'est pas fait le culture en commmun. Apres le recolte, les driots d'occupation prennent fin pour renaitre sur d'autres point la saison suivante".³⁶

Although not regularly cultivated these were lands occupied and exploited by tribes for many generations. These vast lands required a definite legal status both to protect the tribes themselves from a sale instigated by only some of it's members at the expense of the wishes of the others, and to protect potential French purchasers. A decree of January 14, 1901 ordered the creation of a commission to define the geographical

³⁵ M'Halla, M., p. 312.

³⁶ Resident General au Ministredes Affaires Etrangeres, January 27, 1900, cited in Sammut, C. (1983) p. 156.

extents of tribal land and to determine the legal status of the occupants and the conditions in which it could be determined private property.

The results of the commission's studies were that amongst the Madger tribes in the high steppe most of the land was deemed private. Amongst the neighbouring Fraichiche a much smaller proportion of land was considered private. The amount of what came to be termed "collective" land increased towards the south, the Hammama, for example, having been determined as having almost no private land. Some of these lands, at Maknasy, Kasserine and Gammouda, for example, were declared State Domain and the occupants only retained their old rights until allotment was made. Other land, such as that near Sbeitla, which was well irrigated, was bought by the State for future colonization.³⁷

The difference between private and collective land was more than one of a simple definition. Collective land could not be sold and therefore could not be the object of French settlement. But neither could it be used as a mortgage for loans with which the land could be improved. Indeed loans from agencies set up to aid the indigenous populations in times of severe economic difficulty, such as the Societe Indigene de Prevoyance (SIP) would only provide credit against property titles.³⁸

Without ownership of their lands the tribes of southern Tunisia had little chance of improving production techniques or of raising the quality of their livestock. They could neither sell their lands to raise capital nor access mainstream sources of credit. They were, therefore, left with little alternative but to exploit their own lands using traditional techniques. As both the animal and human population increased this inevitably forced the tribes to exploit more and more, increasingly poorer quality, land

³⁷ See Timoumi, H. (1975), *op. cit.*, p.121-191.

³⁸ This was equally true of land deemed private but which had not yet been legally registered by the owner. Many occupants of such lands did not register their properties because of the cost involved: "L'Indigene dont les proprietes ne sont pas immatriculees, ne peut s'adresser aux etablissemments du credit qui lui feraient des avances des conditions raisonnables". L'Avenir de Sousse, March 6, 1904.

for both pasture and crops.

The vast majority of tribesmen depended, during years of drought, on "prets de subsistance" which were loans of grain offered by the Government. These were designed only to meet the immediate subsistence needs of the population and were distributed only under extreme conditions. The other main recourse was to usurers which charged heavy rates of interest.

8.7 Economic Deterioration in South and Central Tunisia

The tribes of south and central Tunisia lived an essentially pastoral way of life. Cereals were important but secondary to livestock. Yet while nomadism and semi-nomadism were adaptations to the often harsh and unpredictable environmental conditions of the region, animal husbandry was scarcely less dependent on climate than the cereal crops. The effects of drought, particularly when widespread or prolonged, on the tribes were severe. Of course the need to pay taxation only exacerbated the subsistence problems of the tribes.

Alfa grass played an important role during the nineteenth century in enabling many tribes to find the additional resources they needed for survival. But without in any way minimizing its importance to the tribes, until the late nineteenth century, alfa grass provided a supplementary income to a relatively limited number of tribesmen. A far more important resource to the on-going viability of the tribal society as a whole was the northern Tell. The Tell had for centuries provided many tribes the possibility of finding both work and pasture at all times but which became particularly important when the crops or pasture were poor in the south.

But the extension of agricultural land in the north from the late nineteenth century, the proliferation of private property, and the increasing degradation of ethnic tribal social ties, meant that the old symbiotic relationship between the tribes of the north and those of the south, between the steppe and the Tell, were to become increasingly more strained during the first half of the twentieth century. In fact the first decade of the twentieth century severely tested these relationships. This was a period of prolonged

dryness in the south. The increase in alfa collections during these years was, therefore, caused not just by the opening of the new railways but also by severe economic pressures in southern Tunisia. Indeed so intensive did the collection of the grass become, especially close to the railways, that the Administration, fearing the imminent exhaustion of the resource, decreed in 1904 that there would be a close time of four months each year during which neither the collection, transport or sale of alfa would be permitted.³⁹ But although this was repeated each year until 1911 it was, in every case, suspended because of the receipt of numerous complaints from merchants, and from tribes deprived of all other means of subsistence:

"Or l'interdiction de la vente d'alfa nous portera un grand prejudice car c'est avec son prix de vente que nous comptons payer nos impots et nos dettes et entretenir mes familles"⁴⁰

The Direction de l'Agriculture, in announcing the suppression of the decree in 1908 commented that it was with the aim of:

"...venir en aide aux populations des regions alfatieres du Centre et du Sud de la Regence eprouvees par la secheresse persistante de l'annee 1907".⁴¹

In 1910, however, the Direction de l'Agriculture warned that the suspension of the close period of previous years was:

³⁹ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Decret du 19 Septembre, 1904. The decree provided for severe fines for infractions.

⁴⁰ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Bel Hassem ben Mansour and others of Gafsa to Prime Minister, August 20, 1906.

⁴¹ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Arrete de le Directeur de l'Agriculture, du Commerce et de la Colonisation, November 28, 1907. But in 1910 the Directeur commented of the repeated suspension of the decree that this was done "au grand detriment des peuplements qui apres avoir souffert de la secheresse eux aussi etaient soumises a une exploitation intensive. C'est ainsi que de vastes etendues sont dans un etat voisine de la ruine et qu'il conviendrait d'y suspendre toute exploitation pendant plusieurs annees". AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Direction de l'Agriculture...., January 7, 1910.

"...au grand detriment des peuplements qui apres avoir souffert de la secheresse eux aussi etaient soumises a une exploitation intensive. C'est ainsi que de vastes etendues sont dans un etat voisine de la ruine et qu'il conviendrait d'y suspendre toute exploitation pendant plusieurs annees".⁴²

In fact the Resident General overruled the department's request for a close time to be imposed in 1910 in commenting:

"En effet dans le Sud deja tres eprouve en 1909, la situation s'est encore aggravee et il est a prevoir que les indigenes devront secourees a nouveau".⁴³

But the severity of the crisis of the first decade of the twentieth century was intensified by the growing opposition of the northern tribes to accept large numbers of people and animals from the south seeking work and pasture for their animals. Thus in 1905 the notables of the cheikhats of Sidi El Sebet told the Caid that a great number of nomads:

"ont envahi leur territoire pour y paturer leurs bestiaux et ou ils ont commis de grands degats et qu'ils ont appris que d'autres nomades sont egalement en routes vers leurs territoires".⁴⁴

The French Administration established the requirement of the tribes of the south that they seek permission from their Caids before moving northward in an attempt to control the scale and destination of the seasonal emigrants. This was not always successful. In 1910, for example, 3000 people of the Souessi in the low steppe moved north of which only 600 were authorised by the Caid. The Caid reported that "qu'il n'est restee dans le caidat que les riches et les enfants en bas age et les personnes infirmes".⁴⁵

But the attempts to limit the numbers of animals originating in the steppe from reaching the north had serious implications for the southern tribes for they had few alternatives.

⁴² AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Direction de l'Agriculture..., January 7, 1910.

⁴³ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Ministere General a Directeur de l'Agriculture, January 15, 1910. The decision was at least partially in response to the loss to the Treasury caused by the inability of tribes to pay their taxes.

⁴⁴ M'Halla, M. (1978) p. 281.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

While the income from alfa could help purchase grains for consumption or for the future harvest or to replace animals lost to the drought, it could not solve the tribes' immediate problem of saving their animals from starvation. In 1906 the Controleur Civil vehemently opposed the decision to limit the transhumance:

"Je signale d'une maniere particuliere a votre attention les serieux inconvenientes que presente cette mesure prohibitive pour les indigenes du Controle de Thala, dont elle trouble les traditions imemoriables au plus grand prejudice de leur existence materielle si precare. Les cultures qu'ils possedent sont peu etendues en egard a la disette de l'annee derniere et a la difficulte qu'ils ont eu a se procurer des semences; elles produiront les rendements peu satisfaisants sur un grand nombre de points par suite de la penurie des pluies en autone ou des degats causes tout recemment par la grele. Dans ces conditons ce serait les mettres dans un grand embarras et accroitre encore leur misere que de leur fermer l'acces des controles voisins; ce serait en outre, faire supporter a...plusieurs milliers d'individus, le poids de la faute, tres grave il est vrai, mais imputable seulement a une bande d'energumenes, depourvus pour la plupart de toute attache avec la masse des interesses".⁴⁶

The Controleur Civil at Beja reported in 1914:

"Je ne pourrai plus empecher ces affames et leurs troupeaux lamentables, de prendre, ou ils la trouvant, leur subsistence. Les gens du sud ont penetre de vive force chex les colons et s'y ont installe avec leurs betes malgre la defense fait pretendant avoir le droit de vivre".⁴⁷

So serious had the problem become that in 1913 a circular was sent to all Caids in the south calling on them to "arreter autant que possible le transhumance qui s'est accrue depuis quelque temps".⁴⁸

In 1908 at the Congress de l'Afrique du Nord it was noted in respect of the tribes of south and central Tunisia:

⁴⁶ Timoumi, H. (1975), p. 182.

⁴⁷ M'Halla, M., *op. cit.*, p. 283.

⁴⁸ M'Halla, M., *op. cit.*, p.283. It was reported that two thirds of the population in the hinterland of Sousse had migrated northwards in 1914.

"Pendant longtemps les habitants de ces contrées ne se sont guères livrés qu'à l'élevage.... Mais la paix française a favorisée une augmentation de la population trop nombreux maintenant pour vivre du régime pastoral...et bientôt ne suffiront plus aux besoins des tribus qui les occupent".⁴⁹

But until the 1920's there was still sufficient pasture and work in the north to continue to accept large numbers of nomads from the south in most years. From the 1920's, however, the population began to increase more rapidly as did the amount of land under cereal cultivation.⁵⁰ In 1924 which was an average year for harvests in the north, the Resident General asked the Contrôleur Civil for information on the state of the pasture in their districts their capacity to accept immigrants from the south.⁵¹ In the Caidat of Ouled Ayar, situated on the southern limit of the Tell it was reported that due to the scale of cereal sowing there was very little pasture and even the animals of this district would be moved further north:

"...les champs de céréales ne laissent guère d'espaces libres pour le paturage et le pacage dans les récoltes donne lieu à des fréquents incidents qui dégénèrent presque toujours en rixe [fights]. La venue d'autres troupeaux étrangères risqueraient donc d'aggraver cette situation".⁵²

⁴⁹ M. Gounod, cited in Housset, L. (1939), *Le Statut des Terres Collectives*, p. 51-52.

⁵⁰ Many semi-nomads from Gabes, Gafsa and Thala, finding access to the Tell difficult, crossed into Algeria in search of pasture but they also caused problems amongst the Algerian tribes: "...les caravanes remontent du Sud de la Tunisie ont, en effet, devancé les nomades algériens et elles ne laisseront plus à ces dernières de quoi nourrir leurs bêtes sur les maigres pâturages où elles auront séjourné." AGT Serie A, Carton 279, Dossier 1, Le Gouverneur Général de l'Algérie à M le Résident Général de France à Tunis, July 6, 1924.

⁵¹ In the south the degree of economic distress was great. The Caid of the Hammam wrote to the Prime Minister in 1923 that "...la situation économique de mon caïdat est actuellement la plus mauvaise et menace d'avoir de graves conséquences si on ne s'empresse d'y remédier. En effet, la misère règne dans tous les points du caïdat et les indigènes, ruinés par les mauvaises années précédentes et la perte de leur bétail...se trouvent...désarmés contre la famine et beaucoup d'entre eux sont réduits à se nourrir d'herbes pour ne pas mourir de faim". Cited in Timoumi, H. (1975) *op. cit.*, p. 233.

⁵² The Contrôleur Civil of Maktar, cited in M'Halla M., *op. cit.*, p. 287. In the neighbouring Caidat of Ouled Aoun the state of pasture was better but even there "les récoltes couvrant la majeure partie du territoire, ne laissent pour le paturage que des

Even when allowed to pasture their herds in the north the southern tribes were forced to pay, from the late nineteenth century, a levy called "achaba" which was charged for each animal for each month. The free pasture rights which had for long prevailed were replaced with this charge which until 1910 was between 0 F 50 and 1 F per head per month.⁵³ By 1927 it had risen to 5 F per head each month.⁵⁴

In the south too, the area under cereal cultivation increased sharply from the end of the nineteenth century pushed by rising grain prices and an increasing population (see Table 8.4 above). Amongst the Madger and Fraichiche tribes the cultivated area was estimated by Charles Monchicourt in 1906 to be approximately 26,000 hectares (just over 3% of the total land area of these tribes).⁵⁵ According to Jean Poncet the cultivated area reached 160,000 hectares in 1950.⁵⁶ But this increase was only made possible by utilizing less fertile land since the best lands had always been selected for sowing by the tribes. As the agricultural area expanded the possibility of leaving some fallow reduced. Often even the best lands were left fallow for at least one year, usually more, to allow the land to recover before being replanted. Crop yields suffered. Even in the land of the Fraichich and Madger situated close to the Tell, Poncet notes that barley yields varied from 0.7 qx per hectare to 2.3 qx per hectare which meant that the harvests of at least 2 of every 3 years were lost.⁵⁷

Further south, towards the lands of the Hammama and Beni Zid, the soil was more arid and even less susceptible to regular cultivation. The area sown under cereals tended to fluctuate greatly depending on both the resources available to tribes and on climate. In bad years such as 1925 138,000 hectares of land were sown with cereals in central

espaces a peine suffisants aux troupeaux de la region". *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁵³ M'Halla, M., *op. cit.*, p. 286.

⁵⁴ M'Halla, M., p. 287.

⁵⁵ Monchicourt, C. (1906) p. 40.

⁵⁶ Poncet, J. (1962) p. 222.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

Tunisia while in good years like 1932, 445,000 hectares were sown.⁵⁸ But with no development in production techniques the impact of a crop failure on an increased population worsened considerably. Timoumi states that the population of the centre-west of the country to have increased from 136,000 in 1911 to 171,000 in 1931.⁵⁹

Unlike in northern Tunisia where the expansion of agricultural production owed much to the commercialization of the economy and to rising market value of grains, in the south of the country it was much more the result of increasing population pressure. Regular and successful agriculture without investment in irrigation machines or even better ploughs was almost impossible in the south where crops and yields were at the mercy of rainfall, wind, temperatures let alone the threat of locusts.⁶⁰

Given the insecurity of cereal harvests the tribes' livestock increased substantially as they sought greater security from the effects of drought. Again amongst the Fraichiche and Madger tribes Poncet records an increase in sheep alone from an average of around 200,000 between 1885 and 1890 to between 500,000 to 600,000 in 1950.⁶¹ But unlike the earlier period by the late 1920's the ability to find pasture in the Tell had decreased considerably and, with the greater land area given over to cereals in the south, so too did the capacity of their own territories to sustain such numbers of animals.

The situation was to worsen considerably in the 1930's. Hit hard by the effects of the world depression large sections of the northern population were placed on the road to

⁵⁸ Timoumi, H. (1975) *op. cit.*, p.390.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁶⁰ Timoumi notes that between 1920 and 1930 there were 79 hailstorms in the Control Civil of Thala. *Op. cit.*, p. 232. The change, in 1909, in the tax on cereal production, the "achour" from one based on the size of the crop to one calculated on the area of land sown hit hardest those living in environmentally marginal regions.

⁶¹ Poncet, J., *op. cit.*, p. 222.

ruin by the downturn in the value of their grain products.⁶² Indebtedness increased sharply. M'Halla calculates the debts of Tunisian agriculture at 204 million francs in 1933 without including amounts owing to private and informal creditors which M'Halla believes must have been a similar amount again.⁶³ But while the small scale Tunisian agriculturalists suffered tremendously during the crisis of the 1930's, the colonial and larger Tunisian landowners sought to counter the slump in the value of grain by reducing production costs to become more competitive. Investments, with financial aid from Government and other public bodies and financial institutions, were made in agricultural machinery, tractors and harvesters which, to maximize the benefits, required larger land units. The 1930's were a time of concentration of property in the hands of a few and at the expense of the many small-holders who, many already crippled with debts, were unable to compete. But the mechanization of agricultural production in the north was to reduce the requirement for labour to a minimum making the possibility of the southern tribes finding work in the north even more remote. In 1939, after almost 60 years under French Administration, Housset reported a complete lack of improvement in the material well-being of the southern tribes which had little to offer, and nothing to gain, from the Government's investment in roads, railways and ports commenting:

"Chez les bedouins des Beni Zid et des Hammama la trachome fait ses ravages, la disette et la faim se font sentir l'ignorance persiste, la vie est toujours aussi miserable".⁶⁴

The rupture of the old order, the strong and reciprocal social and economic relationships which bound the tribes north and south of the Tell, had profound repercussions on the latter. An increased population in the south was forced, more and more, to rely on the limited resources of its regions. If not the only, then certainly by far the most important, economic substitute for the loss of access to work and pasture in the Tell, was alfa grass. During the 1930's in particular alfa grass became a central

⁶² The price of wheat slumped from 201 F per 100 kg in 1927 to 80 F in 1935. M'Halla, *op. cit.*, p. 427.

⁶³ M'Halla, M., *op. cit.*, p. 448.

⁶⁴ Housset, L. (1939) p. 8.

pillar of the economy of south and central Tunisia. The income earned from the sale of alfa helped sustain a way of life which had become entirely marginal:

"...unes des conditions essentielles de l'existence des populations du Centre et des regions circumsahariennes du Protectorat. Le prix auquel il est paye parait minime et ne represente pas le plus souvent celui du transport entre la nappe et le marche sans tenir compte de la cueillette".⁶⁵

8.8 The 1920's and 1930's - "Moralizing the Alfa Trade"

Announced after the abrogation of the concession accorded the Franco-English Company, the principles of the Beylical decree of 1887, which reestablished the regime of absolute freedom of commerce with regards alfa grass, continued to form the regulatory basis of the Tunisian trade until well into the twentieth century. While it was hoped the operation of a competitive and free market of buyers and sellers would set a fair market value for the plant, the legislation also enshrined the tribes' rights to freely collect the grass growing anywhere in their own lands. All parties in the trade were to be protected from the threat of a new monopoly.

During the 1920's and 1930's, however, the increasing reliance of growing numbers of tribesmen on alfa grass as a source of income led to their widespread abuse at the hands of a relatively small number of merchants in amongst whom most of the buying power was concentrated. Collusion amongst the major alfa houses in fixing the terms and conditions of sale was commonplace. As all the major alfa houses had agents in some or all of the main alfa districts, they sought to reduce prices to a minimum by acting as a cartel:

"Il existe ici une entente parfaite entre les maisons d'achat... qui se partagent dans une stricte egalite les arrivages et pratiquent un prix concerté".⁶⁶

In August 1927 the fourteen most important alfa houses met to fix prices for the forthcoming season. The prices for 100kg of top quality grass were to be fixed at 17F

⁶⁵ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Conservateur des Eaux et Forets a M. le Directeur des Affaires Economiques, April 30, 1937.

⁶⁶ AGT, Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Controleur Civil de Sfax a M le Resident General, July 23rd, 1925.

at Hadjeb el Aioun, 16F at Sbeitla and Djilma, 15F at Kasserine and 14F at Thelepte, Feriana, and Maagen bel Abbes. Lower qualities were to be offered between 2F and 3F less to encourage the tribes to collect the best qualities. Each agent was permitted an equal share of the alfa brought in to the markets in which they operated with the following instructions:

"Vous ne devez pas faire la concurrence ni gater le marche sous aucun pretexte car il ne fait absolument pas que si faute il y a celle puisse nous etre imputee. Si un nouveau concurrence surgissait au marche vous vous mettez d'accord entre les agents presents des maisons reconnues pour mettre tout le marche aux prix de l'entent ci-haut fixe et en faire la repartition egale entre vous tous au cas ou enchere vous et acquise".⁶⁷

There was clearly an understanding in 1927 between the alfa houses in Tunisia and the paper industry in the UK in an attempt to control prices:

"Le concurrent ne pourra mettre une surenchere moindre que 1Fr a cette condition vous lui laisseriez prendre tout le marche; car il y a un engagement entre exportateurs et importateurs de ne rien acheter chez la nouvelle concurrence; et celle ci ne trouvait pas de debouche pour sa marchandise cessera d'elle-meme sans que nous ayons a faire des sacrifices d'argents".⁶⁸

It was difficult for many tribes to refuse the prices offered by the merchants. The Controleur Civil at Thala reported that the tribes of the Ouled Sidi Tlil did not have enough grain to sow their crops and would be forced to take out loans with merchants at Feriana to make good the shortfall. He advised them to hold back their sale of alfa until the cartel broke and they could get a better price.⁶⁹ The cartel did, in fact, collapse and though all kinds of price fixing agreements resurfaced in subsequent years,

⁶⁷ Nantes, R8, Controleur Civil de Thala a M Le Resident General, September 23rd, 1927.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*. The alfa houses involved were: Cachia et Wolf (Sousse), Farrugia (Sfax), Zana (Tunis), Borgaud, Baziaux (Alger), Arbib (London), Scicluna (Sousse), Nahum Williams (London), Melca (Tunis), Logie, Morris, Cittanova, and Esparto Ltd (London). In addition the merchants Chalandre and Manoury were permitted to participate.

⁶⁹ Nantes, R8, Controleur Civil de Thala a M. le Resident General, September 15, 1927. He also noted that "Deja une maison, Nahum, s'est reserve le droit de revenir sur les prix fixees et de payer 20F le quintal si les arrivages d'alfa etaient insufficients".

as they had done previously, they were rarely successful for any length of time. But such overt price fixing was but one of a whole series of measures taken by alfa merchants to reduce costs. Prices themselves were never published but rather shouted out after the alfa had been inspected. The collectors were forced to leave their grass in the market (for which they were charged) and only then find out what prices were being offered effectively denying them the opportunity to go to another market if he was dissatisfied.⁷⁰

Perhaps the most serious abuse directed at the tribesmen by the merchants, and one which generated numerous complaints to French officials, was the weighing procedure. Technically all transactions in alfa, as with other commerce in the country, had to be done on an official market and the weighing done by a public weigher. In practice much of the trade took place on unofficial markets i.e. the merchants' alfa yards and there was little independent monitoring or control:

"...sur le marches d'alfa de Maknassy, Zannouch, Sened et Gafsa, les acheteurs pour la plupart israelites, achètent parfois l'alfa sans passer par le marche officiel et sans recourir aux services de peseur publique. Malgré les mesures prises dans cette circonscription pour éviter de tels abus, de nombreuses plaintes parviennent à ce Controle Civil et signalent les agissements des acheteurs qui exploitent l'ignorance des bedouins pour les tromper sur le poids des charges d'alfa apportées par eux".⁷¹

Even on the official markets, however, collusion between merchants and public weighers was commonplace, "...les complicités entre représentants des maisons d'achat et peseurs publiques ne sont pas douteuses".⁷²

⁷⁰ Often the prices were not even shouted in Arabic : "Les chefs de chantiers d'alfa ou leur employees ne font pas proceder à la crie en langue Arabe auquel est payé aux cent kilos l'alfa de Sbeitla et de Djilma". AGT Series E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Commissariat de Police à Sbeitla to Controleur Civil à Thala, March 31st, 1926. This was equally true of the market at Kasserine.

⁷¹ AGT, Series E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Controleur Civil à Gafsa à M. le resident General, July 11, 1925.

⁷² AGT Series E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Controleur Civil à Sfax à M. le Resident General de Tunis, July 23rd, 1925.

Wherever the weighing was done all purchases were subject to a deduction made by the merchants of 30% of the gross weight of the grass. This practice, despised by the collectors, was as old as the trade itself and was designed to cover the loss of weight in the drying process. For the collectors it meant that for every 150 kg of alfa they collected they received payment for only 100kg.⁷³

In addition the sellers were charged by the agents a commission which varied between 2 F 50 and 5F per camel load. In January 1926, the Societe Pour la Defense du Commerce des Alfas de Tunisie, composed of the main alfa houses, fearing the imposition of new controls on their activities, announced in January 1926 that this commission, where charged, should not exceed 2 F 50 per load. In fact many agents ignored the decision while others simply started to round payments down to the nearest whole franc i.e. if a collector should have received 10 F 77 he was in only paid 10 F.⁷⁴ The Societe subsequently appealed to local government officials to ensure that the commission of 2 F 50 was not exceeded, that the offer prices for alfa be shouted in Arabic and that payment must be paid in steps of 50 centimes, while claiming that

"...les maisons alfatiers desirent que l'indigene ne soit pas lese et que tout ce qu'il lui revient lui soit regulierement donne".⁷⁵

The French administration, which believed a more appropriate title for the Societe would have been "la Societe pour l'Exploitation des indigenes vendeurs d'alfa", were

⁷³ "Les alfatiers emploient dans le pesage et dans le reglement de comptes des pratiques si singulieres, que le moins que on puisse dire des marches d'alfa c'est qu'ils meritent d'etre moralises". AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Controleur Civil de Kairouan a M. le Resident General, September 1st, 1925.

⁷⁴ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Societe Pour la Defense du Commerce des Alfas en Tunisie, January 26, 1926.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*.. Charles Cohen, the most influential "independent" alfa merchant appealed to the Controleur Civil at Thala to enforce the regulation with regards commissions which, he said, were charged by, and for the account of, the agents themselves and not the alfa houses. Cohen's old agent, Gabison, subsequently gave evidence that Cohen had told him to charge commissions which were split evenly between them although his new agent, Glemza, Cohen had made him stop charging commissions only two weeks before Cohen's exhortation to the Controleur Civil.

more than a little sceptical that the alfa houses could be relied on to regulate themselves or had any real commitment to improving the situation of the sellers.⁷⁶

The Government's view was that the only way to protect the tribes' interests in the face of a powerful coalition of merchants was to intervene directly in the trade:

"Les apports d'alfa sur les marches de la Regence sont faits en general par les nomades les plus besogneux, ignorants et illettres. Ces apports son d'autant plus importants que l'annee est plus mauvaises et une partie des nomades de l'interieur tirant leurs moyens d'existence de l'industrie alfatiere toujours tres remuneratrice. Dans le Sud ou les recoltes en cereals sont souvent nulles ou deficitaires, beaucoup de familles peuvent ainsi se procurer des moyens d'existence en tout temps, ce qui est un gage de securite dans les campagnes. J'estime donc qu'il serait tres heureux de proteger les alfatiers ignorants contre l'indelicatesse...des acheteurs dont l'honnetete laisse assez souvent a desirer".⁷⁷

It was not until 1927 that legislation was finally brought out, after much discussion, to "moralize" the alfa trade. The most important articles of the decree stipulated that all transactions in alfa could only be carried out on official markets and in the presence of an officially designated public weigher and that henceforth the charging of commissions be made illegal.⁷⁸

But the provisions of the 1927 were largely ignored by the alfa merchants. The alfa trade in the early 1930's was deeply affected by the Depression. Both the value of alfa and the level of British imports fell. Tunisian exports fell to 66,000 tonnes in 1932 and 61,000 tonnes in 1933. But, as with the second half of the 1920's the 1930's were characterised by the persistence of a buyers market. There was great pressure on the tribes to collect and sell alfa because of their deteriorating economic situation. Climatic conditions, particularly in the second half of the 1930's were exceptionally difficult

⁷⁶ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11,, "Note sur le Pesage de l'alfa", Secretariat Generale du Gouvernement Tunisien, January 4th, 1935.

⁷⁷ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Controleur Civile de Gabes a M. le Resident General, October 9, 1925.

⁷⁸ Similar legislation was announced in 1914 but remained a dead letter after the complaints of the alfa merchants. The Administration was wary of provoking a suspension in purchases or a collective attempt by them to force prices down.

while the possibility of procuring resources by working in the harvest in the Tell was much reduced. The impact of the Depression on grain exports and the increasing reliance of large northern landowners on machinery diminished the need for seasonal labour.

The alfa merchants sought every means to exploit the tribes during these years in an attempt to reduce the prices paid for the grass. The Administration's hopes that the requirement for public weighers would help protect the interest of the collectors were quickly dashed:

"Les peseurs jures et autre agents officiels du Controle des Transactions sont generalement les principaux complices de fraudes au benefice des acheteurs et au detriment des bedouins qui approvisionnent les marches officiels".⁷⁹

The practice of charging commissions returned with a vengeance as did that of avoiding the payment of centimes. It was particularly during the periods of greatest supply i.e. immediately prior to the tribes' grain sowing or when harvests were bad, that the abuses multiplied. In a report by Captain Boisseaux of the Gendarmerie of Sousse, the extent of the problem was made clear. The price of 12 Francs per 100kg offered the collectors was purely nominal. On their arrival at the market the collectors were forced to pay the agents 2 Francs for each donkey load and 5 Francs for each camel load just to get him to buy. The public weigher then, illegally, deducted between 20 and 40 kg. Thus if 150 kg was brought in the weight would be given as 110 kg. The weight was then rounded down to the nearest 10 kg; a further 10 kg was deducted for the weight of the cords used to tie the bundles together and on top of this was made the standard 30 % deduction allowed by the Government to cover the weight loss during drying. In addition the seller had to pay a tax of between 0 F 50 and 1 Franc for unloading his alfa on the market, a tax of 0 F 50 for the costs of handling the grass on the market and between 0 F 25 and 0 F 50 for the weigher. Boisseaux noted that the collector often had to travel a round trip of 50 - 60 km and "s'il tombent un jour de pluie ou de grand vent ou l'on n'achete pas, ils devrant s'abriter au fondouk. Ils repartiront avec

⁷⁹ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Note by M. le Directeur Generale de l'Interieur, July 22nd, 1930.

des dettes".⁸⁰

An indigent collector from the Ouled Sidi Tlil, a tribe which relied heavily on the sale of alfa, complained that "Je suis actuellement dans la misere. J'ai arrache ces deux charges d'alfa en 6 jours avec l'aide de ma femme. J'ai mis deux jours pour la conduire sur le marche."⁸¹

In the region of Gafsa it became common practice in years of drought for agents to tell the collectors that they had no more money but that they would buy at one third or even one half of the market value something which, by force of circumstance, was generally accepted by the sellers.⁸²

Another common practice of many agents was the payment in bonds rather than cash:

"...au lieu de les payer en argent ils sont souvent payes en bons de vivres ou de marchandises a prendre chez les commercants du village qui sont associes avec les agents alfatiers".⁸³

The situation had clearly deteriorated since the 1927 law and the Direction des Finances was stating the obvious when he wrote, in 1931, that:

⁸⁰ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, December 2nd, 1932. At Feriana 100 collectors complained in 1933 that the agents demanded a "bonus" of 20 kg before they would be prepared to buy. AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Rapport du Marechal des Logis, Commandant de la Brigade de Feriana, March 30th, 1933.

⁸¹ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11. He was forced to pay 1 Franc commission and the centimes were deducted receiving only 39 Francs for his six days work.

⁸² AGT, Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Controleur Civil de Gafsa a M. le Resident General, March 15th, 1933.

⁸³ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Rapport du Capitaine Boisseaux, December 2nd, 1932. This was also reported in Medenine in the far south and on the markets in Gafsa.

"Les mesures prises jusqu'ici en vue de protéger les indigènes vendeurs d'alfa contre les abus dont ils sont victimes de la part des acheteurs s'étant révélées inopérantes; il est devenu d'autant plus nécessaire d'y renoncer que l'Administration paraît couvrir au lieu de les réprimer les agissements frauduleux et dolosifs des acheteurs et souvent même des peseurs publics à l'égard des vendeurs".⁸⁴

A new commission created in 1931 to study the question and composed of the Directors of Finance, of Agriculture and the Interior, noted in response to a question as to the impact of existing legislation on the moralization of the trade that

"...il faut, malheureusement, répondre par la négative, car les abus n'ont pas cessé. Les pratiques employées ont simplement changé et le fellah, comme par le passé, reste la victime sans moyens de défense".⁸⁵

While there was universal recognition that the 1927 legislation had no impact on "moralizing" the alfa trade there was very little consensus as to how to confront the more serious problems facing the trade in the 1930's. In fact the issue of defending the interests of the collectors was further complicated by needs and rights of those native and foreign individuals who had purchased or rented Domainal land in the Steppe. The Government had offered these plots on state domains in the hope of encouraging settled agriculture. These were sold on the condition that they be at least 40 % of the lot be cultivated within a space of four years. But with Tunisian agriculture suffering severely from the effects of the Depression many were unable to cultivate the lands. By the 1930's European landowners "...a conquis dans les régions alfatières des territoires au premier rang desquels il convient de citer le lotissement de Sbeitla".⁸⁶ During the 1930's the Director des Finances approved numerous requests from these landowners seeking to escape the worst effects of the economic crisis, to set up alfa yards on their lands though subject to the condition that the weighing and purchase be

⁸⁴ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, November 11, 1931.

⁸⁵ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, "Note Sur L'Alfa et les Efforts de l'Administration pour en Moraliser le Commerce", no date.

⁸⁶ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Director des Finances à M. le Directeur de l'Intérieur, March 9th, 1931.

effected on an official market.⁸⁷ This was stipulation was something that few were willing to accept and they demanded the right to carry on whatever trade they saw fit on lands which belonged to them.⁸⁸

A large number of clandestine markets were created throughout the south and centre the transactions on which entirely escaped the control offered by the official markets. Many, in fact, had been operating since before the 1927 law which had only authorised their continuance for one year.

Paradoxically, the alfa yards run by these individuals proved popular with the collectors despite the extremely low prices offered them. The owners of the plots allowed the tribes to pasture their animals on the land while they collected the alfa for the owner's account. This was an important benefit given the increased difficulty, faced by many during the 1930's, in finding adequate pasture. But gathering alfa on these private properties also avoided long journeys to the official markets and unlike the latter where delays, often of several days, were common they were always assured of receiving cash without waiting and without therefore, the cost of resting in a fondouk.⁸⁹ Furthermore there were no hidden charges, no taxes paid for unloading alfa or payments to a

⁸⁷ Those requesting the right to open alfa yards on private land included The Societe Commercial de l'Afrique du Nord near Kairouan, a French colon, Decaillon at Sbeitla, M. Chauvet at Thala and M. Chukri Boulabeche near Sbeitla. There were many others in the early 1930's.

⁸⁸ One French company which rented land said it had no intention of complying with the requirement to transport alfa from his yard to the nearest official market. Ibid. Many tribesmen also seeking relief from the effects of drought and poverty which were all-pervasive in the 1930's tried to sell or rent part of their lands to merchants. Usually these rents were at extremely favourable prices for the merchants although in many cases "collective" land was "sold" by tribes which, being illegal, were annulled by the Administration. See, for example, AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Direction de la Justice Tunisien a M. le Directeur Generale de l'Interieur, September 14, 1933.

⁸⁹ The processing of transactions on official markets was hampered by the need, of the public weighers and the merchants, to register and account for each purchase. The grass was also generally brought into the market in the afternoon and weighing was suspended during the night starting up again the following day. AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Controleur Civil de Thala a M. le Resident General, May 3rd, 1933.

weigher, and no discount of weight for drying.⁹⁰

But the sale of grass on these private lands was not limited to alfa collected there. Many tribesmen collected alfa outside these plots and brought it to sale for the same reasons as given above. They were often much closer to the fields where the grass was cut than the official markets. The prices paid were, however, much lower. In 1933 while they could have received 12 Francs per 100 kg on the official market at Feriana the collectors were paid only 5F - 5F 50 on the private markets. This highlights the great difficulty many of the poorest collectors had in obtaining transport for the alfa either because they had no animals or because their animals were pasturing elsewhere. Indeed one of the fears, in drawing up legislation, was that the closures of these informal markets would seriously affect the poorest collectors:

"Il en resultera une perte seche pour les indigenes pauvres cueillent l'alfa, n'ayant pas de moyens de transport. Cette reglementation causera des frais supplementaires a ceux qui possedent de moyens de transport. Dans certaines parties de la zemla des Ouled Sidi Tlil il en est qui font 30 km pour vendre leurs charges soit 60 km aller et retour".⁹¹

These private markets were disliked by the major alfa houses which felt that they, in complying with the legislation, were being prejudiced in comparison with those who operated yards outwith the official markets. As a result many of the larger companies also set up similar yards outside the official markets, the authorities, apparently, incapable of enforcing the laws.⁹²

⁹⁰ These benefits were detailed in a survey of 100 collectors some of whom collected on the private domains, some selling on these private markets alfa which had been collected elsewhere, and some of which continued to use the official markets. AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Rapport du Capitaine Boisseaux, May 1st, 1933.

⁹¹ AGT, Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Controleur Civil de Thala a M. le Resident General, July 8th, 1925.

⁹² It was a common practice in some areas and at certain periods of the year, usually close to the time of sowing, for tribes to seek loans from either usurers or alfa merchants. The creation of new markets, or private alfa yards, in a region threatened the repayment of loans made to the tribes by alfa merchants on existing markets. At Sbeitla, for example, in 1929, three new yards were established close to the town bringing lively protests from several merchants : "la plupart de ces commercants ont des

The Administration's policy with regards the alfa trade in the 1930's was fragmented. In the commission set up in 1931 each of the Departments had a different view on the measures to take, while the various Chambers of Commerce and Controleur Civil also expressed differing opinions.

The two extreme views were held by the Direction des Finances, which wanted a return to complete freedom of trade, and the Direction de l'Agriculture, du Commerce et de la Colonization, which felt that all land on which alfa grew should be taken over by the State. In the middle was the Direction de l'Interieur which espoused the benefits of tighter controls on the merchants.

The status of alfa lands in France's three north African possessions was discussed at the Conference Nord-Africaine at Rabat where it was agreed that a uniform legal regime would be applied to land covered in alfa in all three countries. Alfa was considered a resource of significant importance from the point of view of maintaining peace and stability in regions populated by semi-nomads who had otherwise little source of income. The threat of internal instability was felt to be real. The Direction de l'Agriculture believed that the alfa lands required a uniform legal definition such that the State could assume responsibility for managing and maintaining the resource:

"Cette absence de statut a laisse l'exploitation des nappes alfatieres se poursuivre dans des conditions qui aboutissent a leur epuisement et a une situation commerciale le plus souvent tres prejudicial a l'interet des populations autochtones".⁹³

The Direction de l'Interieur responded very emphatically that the transformation of all alfa lands into state domain would be neither practicable nor desirable :

relations financieres avec les indigenes et n'arrivent plus a rentrer de leur creances". AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Caid of Sbeitla to the Controleur Civil of Sbeitla, April 1, 1929.

⁹³ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Dir. General de l'Agriculture, du Commerce et de la Colonization a M. le Director de l'Interieur, January 15th, 1929.

"Les nappes alfatieres n'interessent pas exclusivement...les terres dit collectifs. Elles s'étendent sur de vastes perimetres extérieurs, dans le caidats de Thala, de Sbeitla, de Kairouan, de la Skhira. La, la propriété est incontestablement privative; elle y bénéficie des garanties dont l'entourent le droits des gens, les lois écrites et les tribunaux régulières. Une déclaration, pure et simple de domanialité, serait-elle même assortie d'une délimitation, constituerait un acte d'expropriation dont la principe est arbitraire et dont les retentissements seraient detestables".⁹⁴

Indeed alfa was not limited to collective land (see Table 8.5).

Table 8.5 Distribution of Alfa Land (hectares)

Forested domain of the state	190,000
Non-forested domain of the state	170,000
Collective land and habous	590,000
Sub-total Central Tunisia	950,000
Between Gabes and Kebili	50,000
Matmata to Dehibat	300,000
Sub-total Far South	350,000
Grand total	1,300,000

Source : AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Conservateur des Eaux et Forêts a M. le Directeur des Affaires Economiques, April 30, 1937

It would have been impossible, even if thought desirable, to either domainalize what had become private land mostly in the hands of colons or to domainalize only a part of the collective land of some tribes. The Direction de l'Interieur believed that the existing legislation required only modification and stricter enforcement. It wanted to see the creation of sellers' co-operatives and the limitation of all landowners, in private land or terres collectives, to the free use of alfa for their own needs but that all commercialized alfa be directed through official markets. This office felt that without the maintenance of the rule on the use of official markets the effect would be to

⁹⁴ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Dir. de l'Interieur a M. le Directeur de l'Agriculture, du Commerce et de la Colonisation, no date.

"supprimer les apports d'alfa dans les marches officiels qui ont contribuee a provoquer et developper autour d'eux une vie locale plus ou moins intense".⁹⁵

In fact the idea of sellers' cooperatives and of concessions were not new and had frequently been proposed during the twentieth century by administrators and the latter at least supported by some merchants who wanted to enter a market dominated by a few large trading houses.⁹⁶ Organizing the tribes into cooperatives was seen by many as the main means by which the interests of the collectors could be protected:

"Il a paru possible de prevoir l'organisation de centres de ventes par les tribus ou groupes de tribus, et de prescrire que les apporteurs indigenes ne pourront vendre que par l'intermediaire oblige des mandataires designes par eux, agrees par l'autorite et remuneres par u pourcentage contractuel".⁹⁷

Yet, even in 1937 when another study was done on the whole question of the alfa trade, it was clear that the tribes were still sufficiently cohesive to make such a goal impossible:

"Elle presuppose un degre d'evolution chex les tribus indigenes, qui ne semble pas pret d'etre atteint, pour que, meme epaulee par l'Administration, elles soient en mesure de se defendre d'egales a egaux contre les alfatiers".⁹⁸

Finally the Direction des Finances felt that:

⁹⁵ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, November 30th, 1931.

⁹⁶ This was the view of M. Birot who was investigating the possibility of establishing a paper pulp factory using alfa grass in France during the First World War. His reason for wanting a concession was to help keep costs down given the uncompetitive costs associated with producing alfa paper in France because of the high prices of coal and chemicals. See AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, E. Birot, President de l'Association Coloniale a M. le Directeur de l'Agriculture et du Commerce, November 12, 1917.

⁹⁷ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Compte Rendu a M. le Directeur de l'Interieur, July 22, 1930.

⁹⁸ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, "L'Alfa", Le Conservateur des Eaux et Forets, April 30, 1937.

"...les abus auxquels donnerait lieu le commerce libre ne me paraissent...pas plus excessifs que les operations usuraires que dissimule la vente a Selem des cereals".⁹⁹

There were many other opinions expressed in the three years before a new law was published but these were variations on the themes set out above.

When finally published the decree of September 16th, 1933 was perhaps not surprisingly, far from radical. The existence of the public weighers was maintained although all charges and deductions (including the 30 % weight deduction) were abolished other than that covering the tare of an alfa load which was fixed at 5 kg. All transactions had to be in cash and the weighers were to keep a register of both the weight and value of all alfa transactions made. Subsequent modifications stipulated a number of other charges and taxes which the sellers would have to pay mainly to cover the costs of weighing and handling charges on the markets.

Despite the new legislation abuses continued in the late 1930's, a report by the Directeur des Affaires Economiques commenting that the use of bonds rather than cash was still in existence in 1937 by which time

"...il semble indispensable d'intervenir a bref delai pour proteger l'indigene illettre et isole, agissant par nature en dehors de toute idea de cooperation, contre la coalition des acheteurs, fort habiles a tourner a son detriment toutes les mesures de reglementation".¹⁰⁰

The sharp deterioration of the economic situation of the tribes, particularly during the severe drought and ecological disaster of the late 1930's, brought renewed urgency to the need to find a solution to the problems of over-harvesting and the protection of the tribes.¹⁰¹ The huge rise in alfa exports of this period is a reflection of the crisis

⁹⁹ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, March 9th, 1931.

¹⁰⁰ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, "L'Alfa", April 30th, 1937. It was also stated that payment was not immediate, delays having been introduced by the alfa houses.

¹⁰¹ In 1936, when tribes were being paid an average of 9 F per 100 kg, the income from the sale of alfa "...en cette periode de vie chere, de tels prix constituent un salaire

amongst the tribes. In the late 1930's there were many desperate pleas from tribes almost begging for alfa markets to be created on their lands.¹⁰²

Although further studies recommended the creation of a government-run alfa office to monitor and control the commerce this was never implemented because of the costs involved and the difficulties in establishing uniform norms which could be applied in private and domainal land and in the "terre collectives".

In 1939 the Administration legislated quotas for the exportation of alfa grass in an attempt to avoid the plant's exhaustion. During the 1940's the persistence of transactions outside official markets forced the Government to accept their existence since, despite the low prices paid they gave collectors distant from official markets, the possibility of earning some money from the sale of alfa grass. So widespread had collections become that this was nothing more than giving in to reality since the costs associated with monitoring transactions was heavy and largely ineffective.¹⁰³

8.9 Conclusion

The construction of railways from Sfax, Sousse and later Gabes, to the interior provided an enormous impetus to the alfa trade in Tunisia from the early twentieth century. Transport by animals had always been a limiting factor in the commerce not only because of their limited load carrying capacity but also because the long journeys involved in taking grass to the coast interfered with traditional movement patterns of the pastoralist tribes which were habitually north-south rather than east-west. The railways' role in reducing distances which the tribes had to cover just to sell the grass on coastal markets and in permitting much larger scale movement of the material to the

extremement mediocre". AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, "L'Alfa", April 30, 1937.

¹⁰² See various correspondence in AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11. The Controleur Civil at Gafsa requested the opening of an alfa market at Redeyef which "...contribuera, dans une large mesure a l'amelioration de la situation economique dans cette region". Letter to Resident General, October 18, 1938.

¹⁰³ See L. Charmetant and A. Louis (1950).

ports was fundamental to the rapid expansion of the trade in the first half of the twentieth century.

But the railways were a facilitator rather than a direct stimulus to the collection of grass. Even in 1933 the collection and sale of alfa was still considered by the tribes as a degrading activity:

"Il n'existe pas de fellahs cueilleurs-vendeurs d'alfa. Le ramassage de l'alfa est considere comme une besogne humiliante en raison de fatigues qu'il comporte et du peu de revenus a en tirer n'est pratique par les familles les plus misereuses".¹⁰⁴

It was not the prices offered the tribes which produced the increased collections. In fact prices were much lower in the period of most rapid growth in the 1930's than they had been during most of the 1920's. Prices were a secondary issue in determining, in overall terms, the level of tribal participation in the commerce. Of far greater importance in this regard was the economic situation of the tribes. This was equally true of the twentieth century as it was of the nineteenth century. What differentiated the two periods was the degree of economic distress.

During the nineteenth century the southern tribes continued to have access to work and pasture in the northern regions. Climatically more favoured, cereal harvests and pasture were, in general, much better and more reliable in the north than the south. The north, therefore, provided the southern tribes a vital safety valve when drought, or other natural catastrophe, struck their own regions. But as production became increasingly commercialised, the area of land under cereal cultivation expanded rapidly in the northern regions. This limited the availability of pasture to such an extent that in many places it was barely sufficient to meet the needs of the animals belonging to the northern tribes themselves. The free access to pasture which the tribes of the south had once enjoyed was abruptly halted and the charge for its use continued to rise.

¹⁰⁴ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Controleur Civil a Gafsa a M. le Resident General, March 5, 1933.

At the same time complaints from the northern tribes concerning the damage to both crops and pasture caused by the influx of transhumants led the Administration to require the immigrants to seek permits which would allow them access to the Tell. Control of movement was combined with limiting the movement of tribes.

But in the harsh environment of southern Tunisia pastoralism was dependent on the ability to move, sometimes over long distances, in search of pasture for the animals. The restrictions placed on their annual migrations and the control over their transhumance undermined the tribes' economic base. They came to rely more and more on the limited ecological resources of their own regions.

The conversion of taxes into money payments and rising prices of cereals forced the tribes to sow greater areas of land. But the land brought under cultivation was of inferior quality for cereals since the best lands were already in use. Not only did this affect yields but the impact of crop failure on the southern population, which increased considerably during the twentieth century, was magnified.

The tribes were faced with little option but to exploit their own lands more extensively. The number of animals increased sharply since animals could at least be eaten or sold, no matter how cheaply, when circumstances dictated, although from the early 1930's a tax was levied on each animal. Livestock could also be replaced through natural regeneration. When crops failed, they had nothing left but the need to find resources to sow again the following year.

Despite efforts to present the contrary, fifty years of French control had brought the tribal populations of southern Tunisia, described as "les plus desheritees de la Regence", little in the form of economic improvement.¹⁰⁵ The development of communications, which was funded in large part by the Tunisian population, had little positive impact on the south and central regions:

¹⁰⁵ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, "L'Alfa en Tunisie", March 2, 1937.

"Les populations bedouins sont dans un état de dénuement souvent total. La civilisation ne consiste pas seulement à tracer des routes, à élever des barrages, à jeter des ponts. Elle doit apporter du bien-être aux populations".¹⁰⁶

Extensive pastoralism was incompatible with the development of capitalism. The main wealth of these regions, the livestock, was of the most inferior quality for which France had little demand. Although barley produced in the south was exported it was not a resource which could be relied upon.

The growth in both the human and animal population, the extension of cereals together with much greater difficulties in migrating northward, placed a considerable strain on the limited resources of the south. As more marginal land was brought into use, the ability to leave areas fallow declined and the risk of crop failure increased. Pasture was further limited by the increased area given over to grain crops.

The decision to classify most tribal lands in the south as collective on which the tribes merely enjoyed the right of usage meant that there was little possibility of consolidation of properties or of improvement in either agricultural techniques or of livestock. The land could be neither bought or sold and nor was there any opportunity to access mainstream credit which were always required to be backed by mortgages on registered private property.

By the 1930's the economics of the tribes' traditional pastoral way of life had become unsustainable. The annual migrations turned into a massive and constant flow of hungry animals and men. Timoumi notes that in 1936 and 1938 as many as 150,000 men and 350,000 animals trekked northward in abject misery.¹⁰⁷

Although resort to usurers became widespread, alfa grass became the principal source of income for many tribes:

¹⁰⁶ Housset, L., *op. cit.*, p. 203.

¹⁰⁷ Timoumi, H., *op. cit.*, p. 438.

"Il convient de considerer enfin que la meilleure partie de la population indigenes du centre et du sud tire de l'alfa pendant les annees de secheresse son unique moyens d'existence".¹⁰⁸

In some cases up to half the tribes' resources were reported to come from sales of alfa.

"Il faut souligner egalement que l'arrachage de l'alfa constituant pour les tribus nomades des cheikhats des Affial et des Ouled Sidi Tlil environs la moitie de leurs revenus annuels".¹⁰⁹

The very marked increases in exports from the second half of the 1920's is a reflection of the growing poverty of tribal Tunisia.

By the late 1920's alfa grass had become the tribes' principal source of regular income and the main means by which the traditional, pastoral way of life was sustained even in the face of a clear deterioration in the economic and ecologic conditions of south and central Tunisia. From an important source of equilibrium in the nineteenth century, alfa became in the twentieth, the central support of a whole population. But it was nothing but a short term solution to a long term, structural problem.

As the tribes came to place greater reliance on alfa grass they began to suffer increasingly from exploitation at the hands of a few, powerful, trading houses. The latter, and their agents and representatives, employed a panoply of means to reduce the prices paid to the collectors for the grass. In an attempt to protect the tribes and, it must be said, to ensure the maximum of revenues to the Treasury, the Administration brought in successive legislation to regulate the trade. These were, however, popular with few of the direct participants in the trade. The requirement that all transactions take place on official markets was criticized by many, often French citizens and companies, who owned or rented private lands in the Domainal properties. They were loathe to go to the time and expense of taking their grass all the way to official markets. The tribes themselves often preferred these clandestine markets which,

¹⁰⁸ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Controleur Civil at Gafsa to M. le Resident Generale, March 15, 1933.

¹⁰⁹ AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, "Note sur l'alfa et les efforts de l'Administration pour en moraliser le Commerce", April 1937.

despite the low prices offered, were closer to the areas where grass was collected and the actual transactions were quicker and more transparent.

Although the Administration sought, at many opportunities, to create some form of uniform regulations for the country's alfa resources under the auspices of a central government office, this proved impossible given the existence of alfa on the domainal lands of the state, on private lands and on the collective lands of the tribes. The system of concessions was likewise discounted in Tunisia for the same reasons. Indeed it is interesting to note that the Tunisian tribes regularly received higher prices than those paid on the concessions in Algeria where official legislation determined a minimum price equivalent to just 4% of the price of wheat.¹¹⁰ Hopes for the creation of seller cooperatives among the tribes were also doomed to failure mainly because of the habitual mobility of the tribes and the maintenance of strong ethnic social ties.

The alfa industry in Tunisia never really developed from a commerce based on supplying raw material to the British market. Several attempts were made to make the production of wood pulp possible but these failed because of the high cost of coal and chemicals and the limited availability of water.¹¹¹ In fact it was not until the 1950's, after Tunisia achieved independence from France, that a paper factory was built at Kasserine to use alfa grass as a raw material.

¹¹⁰ Cohen, C. (1937) p. 8. Cohen felt, "...le systeme algerien [i.e., concessions] n'est pas moral, n'est pas humain, tandis que celui pratique en Tunisie est essentiellement de liberte, de securite et de productivite", p.5.

¹¹¹ M. Bouby, for example, established a small factory near Sbeitla in 1904 on 12,000 hectares of domainal land on condition that they export 2,000 tonnes of alfa pulp per year. But this attempt failed when the Administration decided that the water they had intended to use be set aside for the growing urban population in Sfax. AGT Serie E, Carton 64, Dossier 11, Proces Verbal de la Seance du Conseil des Ministres et des Chefs, November 30, 1907.

AGT Serie A carton 206/2

Belgacem ben Amor ben Dharfa and others of Oulad Slama (Gafsa) to Prime Minister, August 7, 1911

Djemmaia recently charged a commission to proceed to the allotment of lands belonging to foundation of Sidi Aissa. As it is the moment of harvests and we are crippled with debts we ask you to provide us with legal aid.

And 18/6/1913

Djemmaia declared some years ago that our lands were part of habous of Sidi Aich. Decided that we pay 400 F per annum as enzel and we keep possession of our lands. Now this land has been delimited by French engineer and now we learn that another Arab wants the land and offer a higher amount to Djemmaia. We have no other lands and are willing to pay whatever it takes to keep it.

Res Gen to MAE, Paris, 31 dec 1912

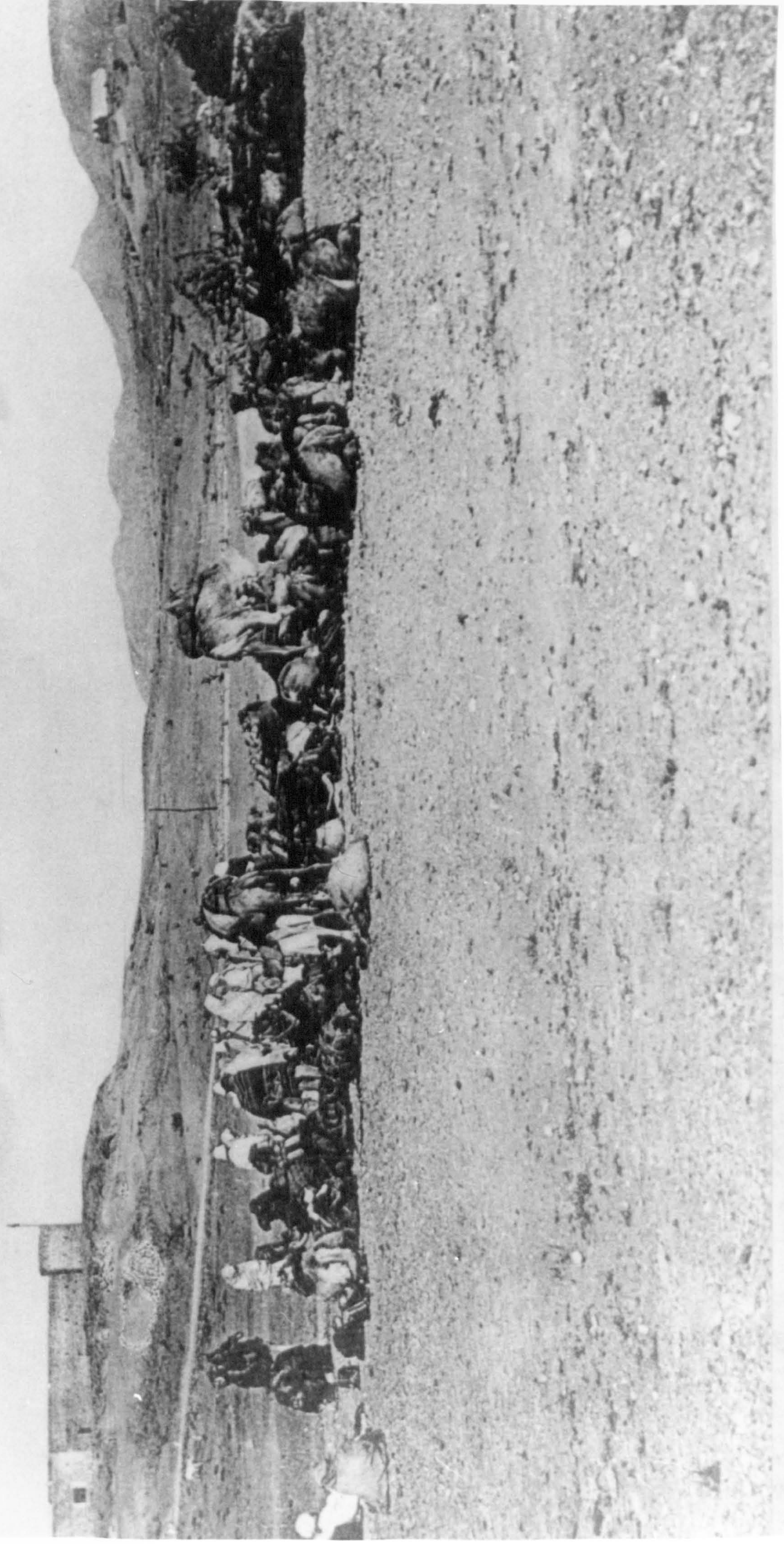
Sidi Ayich is habous and occupied by five fractions always fighting over who owns what bit. Want to sort it out to delimit and for each. Only get 6000F for 60,000 ha. Also have the happy consequence "de sedentariser les tribus actuellement nomades".

Le Delege a la Residence General de la Republique Francaise a Tunis, a M. Pichon, MAE, October 2, 1913

The original wally opposed to enzel although once made him happy:

"elles risquait, en effet, de faire echouer la mise en valeur de 60,000 ha de terres et, en outre, d'empêcher la sedentarisation de plusieurs milliers d'indigenes, but que se propose le Gouvernement Tunisien".

22. - DÉHIBAT (650 km. de Tunis). - Caravane campant autour du puits sous la protection du Bordj



Chapter Nine

Conclusion

This study addresses a well worn theme in the Social Sciences: how, why and with what consequences capitalism expands and spreads into regions and amongst peoples hitherto on the margins of, if not wholly isolated from, the evolving world capitalist economy of the nineteenth century. The study of the alfa trade in Tunisia provides a fascinating example of capitalist penetration in a non-capitalist (or pre capitalist) society for the grass grew, and was sourced from, regions of the country only marginally integrated into what was, even in 1870, but an embryonic nation-state. Indeed, although an over-simplification, the Regency of Tunis could almost be described as a State of two nations, the first being composed of the mainly sedentary populations inhabiting the climatically more favoured northern districts and the towns, villages and countryside along the entire coastal belt, and the second being made up of a loose confederation of semi-independent tribes occupying most of the interior and south of the country. Amongst the former, where market principles and trade, both internal and international, were of long standing, the rule of the central government in Tunis was all-pervasive. By contrast the control and authority exercised by the Bey amongst the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of the interior was weak, limited largely to the annual collection of taxes carried out as much for political motives as a sign of Beylical power as for financial, the cost of the mahalla often outweighing the revenue generated. In the absence of the formal organised and hierarchical structures of the central government social cohesion amongst the interior tribes was based on real, or perceived, notions of kinship and political order maintained by the bi-polar balance and opposition of these forces at different levels of the tribal society. Economically, production was overwhelmingly subsistence orientated based largely on animal husbandry and here too, kinship and tribal ties played the dominant role in defining relations amongst and within the tribes. Though by no means a single, unified self contained unit social, political and economic organisation and action in tribal Tunisia was very much collective in nature and internally orientated. Direct contact with the towns and settled populations in the rest of the country were few and fitful and a deep distrust permeated the tribes'

perceptions of indigenous and foreign traders alike.

It was against this, somewhat unlikely, background, that the alfa trade in Tunisia began in 1870 amidst widespread scepticism from most contemporary observers. Yet even the most optimistic expectations of merchants were quickly surpassed to the extent that in 1881, just 10 years after contact was initiated with the tribes, alfa grass became Tunisia's most important export measured by value and by volume, a remarkable feat given the very low value/weight ratio of alfa grass when compared with the traditional, centuries old, staple exports of the country, grain and olive products. More astonishing still the alfa merchants received scant support either in the form of direct or indirect aid from local or regional government authorities. Largely unregulated, the alfa trade in Tunisia was dictated and directed by the free market principles of supply and demand and its success was based not on any coercive action by a concert of traders and government but rather on the willing participation of the tribes in the collection, transportation and sale of the grass to merchants. Almost overnight the tribes' were, for the first time, brought into direct contact with the full forces of a local and international market via the trade in alfa grass and their response is clearly reflected in the export statistics.

At first sight the Tunisian alfa trade appears to be a classic example of the vent-for-surplus theory of international trade. The tribes were able to furnish a remarkable quantity of grass for the export markets without any apparent impact on their production from traditional economic activities. This is an eloquent testament to the degree of idle or under utilised resources of land and labour in the interior of the country. Yet despite this and the impressive revenues generated from the sale of alfa and accruing to the collectors, the trade itself did not result in self-sustained economic development in the regions from which the grass was sourced. Indeed, even in the 1930's when over 100,000 tons of grass was being exported annually these regions remained sorely underprovided in terms of economic and social infrastructure and manifestly deficient with regards to any of the benefits one might have expected from the theoretical standpoint of classical trade theory. Clearly the topic is too complex to be explained with reference to narrowly economic issues and this thesis has sought to

provide an understanding of the origins and impact of the alfa trade in Tunisia by constructing an analytical framework across a broad spatial and historical canvas, one which is woven as much by the country's richly varied social, cultural and environmental threads as it is coloured by those of politics and economics.

Perhaps fundamental to any interpretation of the alfa trade in Tunisia and to the motivations of the tribes in collecting the grass is the very nature of alfa itself. Alfa is not a crop and in this regard, if no other, the trade is unique in Tunisia as it is in the colonial (or post-colonial) history of the rest of Africa. Alfa grass is a self-regenerating natural and indigenous resource which requires no sowing or planting and involves no time or effort in tending. Furthermore participation in the alfa trade required no capital outlay on land or materials on the part of the collectors. Access to the grass growing on 'collective' land was, to all intents and purposes, free to all throughout the period under study. As a consequence the tribes were never forced to make the decision of changing from subsistence production to export production. Alfa was never perceived by the tribes as anything other than a complement, rather than an alternative, to their traditional economic activities. Indeed participation in the alfa trade was universally considered by the tribes as extremely degrading. Not only was the work involved in the collection, transportation, and sale of alfa grass heavy and time consuming but the remuneration was meagre at best. It was only in extremis when faced with insurmountable subsistence problems or when no other alternative source of income was available that the tribes, as a last resort, turned to alfa. This was a role for which alfa grass was uniquely suited for unlike both cereal production and, to a lesser extent, animal husbandry, the twin staples of tribal production, it was resilient to, even flourished under, the harsh conditions which characterise the arid and semi-arid environment of southern Tunisia. When drought struck alfa could always be relied upon to provide at least some income to help alleviate a crisis in subsistence production. Whereas, prior to the inception of the alfa trade, severe drought and the disease which inevitably came in its wake, could, and often did, have, a catastrophic impact on both the animal and human population alike, after 1870 the threat was much reduced. Alfa grass was a resource of singular utility to the tribes and it was with pragmatism that the tribes regarded and exploited it.

The scale of the alfa trade can not, therefore, be taken as an indication of the extent to which the tribes had accepted market principles or capitalist ethics but rather a function of the degree of economic distress to which they were subjected. In this regard the dramatic rise in alfa collections and exports in the first half of the twentieth century is a clear sign of how much economic conditions amongst the tribes had deteriorated since the end of the previous century. Greatly reduced access to the Tell for labour and pasture forced a growing population in the south of the country into greater dependence on their own lands which were becoming increasingly unable to sustain them. The expansion in the cultivated area was achieved only by exploiting those lands of poorer quality which had previously been left unused or intensifying production on the better soils. Not only did crop yields suffer but the quality and extent of land available for pasture suffered correspondingly something made worse by the fact that the animal population itself rose sharply during these years. The potential effects of drought on an increased population were made immeasurably worse and reliance on alfa grass increased sharply. There were few alternatives. The Government itself had no clear development policy to address the fundamental decline in the viability of rural Tunisia and the revenues earned by the tribes from the sale of alfa undoubtedly enabled the Government to avoid facing the urgent need for action. Much of the income earned by the tribes from the sale and export of alfa was siphoned off by the Treasury in the form of direct and indirect taxes on the population. As little of this was reinvested in the alfa regions themselves, the tribes' need to secure the wherewithal to pay taxes, after ensuring their subsistence needs were met, simply helped perpetuate the vicious circle in which they were caught. Even in the 1920's and 1930's when Government officials began to take more heed of the degree of the tribes' dependence on income from the sale of alfa and the abuses to which the collectors were subjected by the alfa merchants the Administration's action was wracked by indecision for fear of pushing the merchants to reduce their activity in Tunisia and thereby jeopardising the fragile equilibrium in the interior which the trade itself helped maintain.

The trade in alfa grass played a curious role in the economic and social development of Tunisia. Without doubt it was one of the country's most important branches of commerce providing, by the 1930's, employment for tens of thousands of people and

generating up to 30 million francs of income a year for the south of the country. Despite this the alfa trade neither caused any far reaching social change nor did it result in any self-sustaining economic development in the south. Indeed instead of promoting the destruction of the traditional ways of life amongst the tribes the meagre incomes earned from the sale of alfa helped them subsidise their traditional economic activities beyond the point at which they could otherwise have been sustained.

Appendix 1. Routledge's Patents for the Treatment of Esparto¹

Routledge's First Patent

"Letters patent to Thomas Routledge of 17 Gracechurch Street for the invention of improvements in the manufacture of half-stuff and paper, sealed 30th January, 1856, and dated 31st July, 1856.

Provisional specification left by the said Thomas Routledge at the office of the Commissioner of Patents with his petition on 31st July, 1856.

I, Thomas Routledge, of 17 Gracechurch Street, do hereby declare the nature of the invention for improvement in the manufacture of half-stuff and paper to be as follows : The invention consists in the preparation of half-stuff (paper pulp) and paper from Esparto or Spanish Grass and other raw fibrous substances by treating them (when cut to suitable lengths) with a Caustic ley, composed in the ordinary manner of soda or potash and lime, but containing an excess of lime - i.e. more lime being present than is necessary to bring the gums, resinous and siliceous matters (coating and cementing together all raw vegetable fibres more or less) in a soluble state. The substances, after being boiled in this ley, are washed in a rotating vessel, let down into a receptacle to steep and afterwards drained and washed and are then fit for making the ordinary descriptions of paper.

For a superior quality of paper after boiling in the first ley with excess of lime, the fibre is drained and boiled a second time in a bath of Carbonate of Soda (washing soda) drained, washed and reduced to half stuff in the ordinary rag beating engine and submitted twice to the bleaching process, washed, treated with acid which is washed out and then made into paper or sold as half-stuff.

¹ Reid, J. (1948) pp. 229-31.

SUMMARY OF SPECIFICATION

The esparto is cut to a few inches long.

Ley

I take soda (using the impure caustic carbonate known in commerce as Soda Ash, by preference) and quick or caustic lime from 10-15 lb. of the former and a similar quantity of the latter; these are boiled together in a suitable vessel with a sufficient quantity of water, not less than 10 times the weight of soda used, settle, decant or syphon off the solution and add more water so as to nearly cover the fibrous substance in the boiler or vessel in which boiling is to take place.

The solution is milky from excess lime and is in that state a more effective solvent for gum, resinous matters etc. The above strength is sufficient for ordinary class of half-stuff suitable for cartridge or common printing papers. For whiter half-stuff, the quantity of soda with lime may be increased with advantage up to 20 or 25 lb. to one cwt. of material treated to facilitate the subsequent process of bleaching; or the lime in excess may be allowed to deposit and the ley used clear if considered desirable for the finer or more delicate description of fibres.

The strength of caustic ley cannot be distinctly defined (except within the limits above mentioned) for every description of fibre or for any individual fibre as each will naturally be procured in different stages of growth and preparation; but the desired strength of ley may be considered determined when the fibre is found, after boiling, on being broken or torn asunder to present a point or jagged end and the strength of ley must be increased or diminished a little more or less until this point is arrived at.

The Esparto or fibrous substances, boiled in caustic ley a suitable time, which is ordinarily from three to five hours, is tested as above. It is drained and again boiled with solution of common carbonate of soda 2-5 lb. per cwt. of material or bi-carbonate in less proportion.

One hour's boiling is sufficient to liberate the colouring and gummy resinous matters

already disturbed but up till then incorporated with the fibres which are then completely disintegrated and ready to be transferred to the original rag breaking and washing engines, broken into half-stuff as in the case of rags. The boiling may be done in cylindrical rag boilers as known and practised. I employ the Lancashire Bowling-Keir, also Donkin's Cylindrical boiler and I also use the leys and Soda solution again and again until too highly charged with colour and extracted matter bringing them up to the desired degree of strength by adding the requisite quantity of lime and bringing them to standard and as they become foul, I use them in the manufacture of inferior half-stuff and paper".

It concludes, "I do not therefore claim the manufacture of half-stuff or paper from Esparto or other fibres generally, but what I claim is the treatment of Esparto and other fibres by a ley containing more lime than is necessary to render alkali caustic and afterwards boiling and rinsing the fibre in a solution of carbonate or bi-carbonate of Soda. Sealed 26th January, 1857.

In his second patent, Routledge admitted that this excess of lime formed insoluble compounds and he therefore abandoned the idea and claimed instead a liquor causticised to the extent of 60-70 per cent.

In his third patent part of the carbonate solution is reserved and added to the remainder which is to be fully causticised.

Synopses of Routledge's Patents from 1856

Pat No 1816 : 31.7.1856

Boil esparto in caustic alkalis in presence of excess lime, then in solution of carbonate or bicarbonate of soda; wash, break, bleach as usual. Leys may be used again after adjusting strength. Bleaching may be repeated followed by wash, acidification and wash.

Pat No 274 : 2.2.1860

Improvement in 1816, as excess lime formed insoluble compounds. Gently boil in

solution of carbonate of soda made caustic by lime to 60-70 per cent. causticity. Drain, wash, break up and bleach with steam and/or acid. May be passed through rollers before bleaching. After breaking up, it may be acidified with sulphuric or hydrochloric acids, but this bath is not necessary for common printings.

Pat. No 1548 : 17.6.1861

Preparation of alkaline solutions for 274. A proportion of the soda ash is reserved and the rest dissolved in water and causticised and causticised by lime and steam or agitation. Decant after settling and add the reserved soda ash.

Pat. No 297 : 1865

Treatment of waste liquor.

Pat. No 532 : 25.2.1865

Waste liquor from boiling esparto is used for lixiviating of black-ball of alkali manufacture and the liquor so obtained, with or without the addition of quicklime, is used in boiling esparto, straw and other fibres. If the liquors contain too much organic matter, they may be boiled down and exposed to red heat with or without the addition of sulphate of soda, nitre cake or the like, and calcined.

Pat. No 1602 : 13.6.1865 (with W.H. Richardson)

Esparto liquor removed by centrifuging or by rollers. Coal pitch, tar etc. may be added before incineration. Sulphates may be eliminated from the causticised liquor by adding barium compounds. Bleaching by use of chlorine water, and use of acids or alkaline hypochlorites.

Pat. No 1044 : 26.3.1868 (with W.H. Richardson)

Boiled and washed esparto is bleached in a rotary or stationary steam-tight vessel using team to boiling temperature. The bleach can be reduced by from two thirds to one half of the usual quantity.

Pat No. 1855 : 16.9.1869

Preparing esparto half-stuff for transport by pressing, rolling, teasing and partly drying warm air.

Pat. No 748 : 14.3.1870

Boiling and washing wood in a series of vessels heated by a superheated steam in blind pipes, also applicable to esparto and straw.

Pat. No 2470 : 13.9.1870

Boiling and washing esparto, etc in a series of boilers for paper stock. Bleaching in another series made of wood, brick, cement or stone is not carried so far as when made for papermaking.

Pat. No. 2431 : 15.8.1872

After gummy and resinous matters have been removed straw, flax, hemp, jute etc. heckled, willowed and carded for spinning. Retting in tanks under alkaline conditions.

Pat. No. 6061 : 19.2.1882

Additions to 2470 and 2431. Liquor is transferred from vessel to vessel in the series by pumping or by steam pressure instead of hydrostatic pressure.

Pat. No. 12427 : 15.9.1884

Digesters for use with acid liquid under high pressure or temperature are made entirely of lead, or of lead and antimony instead of having a separate lead lining.

Pat. No. 15006 : 1886

Edge runner with hard and soft strips on the grinding surfaces.

Appendix 2. "Translation from the original Arabic of the concession granted by the Bey to Mr Duplessis for the disposal of all the Esparto grass growing in one of the principal districts of the Arad Province", FO 102/140, Enclosure in Mr Reade's despatch no 12, of March 22, 1882.

Praise be to God,

In our capacity of guardian of the public interests, we have hereby conceded to the respectable Mr Rene Duplessis, the collecting and disposal of the esparto Grass in the undermentioned mountains, on the following conditions:

- 1) The above person is authorised to collect esparto grass in the mountains called "Werghemma", "Yaishya", "Haddadge", "Buhedma and "Majura". He can also construct a road along the said mountain to terminate at the port of Sghira. The road shall be exclusively for the transport of the grass and for no other purpose. It may be a railway or a tramway for the use and advantage of the concessionaire.
- 2) The duration of the concession is 99 years counting from the date of this decree, and no other than the concessionaire shall have any rights to its advantages.
- 3) In the expiration of the above term, the concessionaire will have to deliver all the works connected with the present concession in the best possible condition, and neither he himself nor his successors shall have a right to any indemnity in respect thereof.
- 4) He shall employ native labourers and pay them equitable wages.
- 5) He will be subject to all established taxes and to such others as may be hereafter established.

Tunis, 15 Regib 1298.

Appendix 3. Perry Bury ship charters (1891)

Charter by Perry Bury of SS Loch Katrine from the Dundee Loch Line Steam Shipping Co. Ltd (1891)

Charter by Perry Bury of SS Vivienne from Ballingall & Galloway (1891)

ESPARTO.

PERRY, BURY & CO.,
LIVERPOOL.



Charter-Party.

London 23 September 1891

IT IS THIS DAY MUTUALLY AGREED between

of the good Steamship or Vessel called the *Vivienne* *owned by Messrs. Ballingall & Garroway*
classed of *252* tons register and *bound to Balise to*
British Channel to discharge with liberty to take outward cargo to any port
in Mediterranean or on the way
and
PERRY, BURY & CO., MERCHANTS.

That the said Steamship being tight, staunch and strong, and every way fitted for the Voyage, shall, on completion of her present Voyage, *discharge at outward port as above*
immediately proceed to

SUSA, SEAX, GABES, SKIRA, *one or two ports as ordered at outward.*

and (by *discharge*) from the *Port* of the said Affreighters, a full and complete Cargo of ESPARTO HIRE
(within deck load) in Hydraulically *mechanically compressed iron-bound bales*, (Charterers supplying some Esparto,
sufficient for storage only at full Freight, but no proportion of Cargo exceeding ten per cent. to be landed here, *at discharge*
not exceeding what she can reasonably stow and carry *her Tackle, Apparel, Provisions, and Furniture*
and being so loaded shall therewith *be subject to the same* *UNDERLYING* *as ordered on signing*
Bills of Lading, and deliver the same, always afloat, in good order, in *BIRKENHEAD* *after having obtained a proper discharging*
berth, on being paid Freight at and after the rate of

20/- (twenty shillings) if loaded at one port

20/- (twenty shillings) if loaded at two ports

deckload at half freight but if at discharge delivered round owners to receive two thirds freight

In full of all Port Charges and Pilotage (the Act of God, the Queen's Enemies, Fire, and all and every other Dangers and Accidents of the Seas, Rivers, and Steam Navigation of whatever Nature and Kind soever, during the said Voyage, always excepted).

The Cargo to be brought to and taken from alongside at Charterers' risk and expense, and in accordance with custom of respective Ports.

Ship damaged Esparto to pay half Freight, but not exceeding 2 per cent. of entire Cargo.

The Freight to be paid as follows:—Sufficient cash for Ship's ordinary disbursements on signing Bills of Lading, less 2 per cent. to cover Interest and Insurance, and the remainder on unloading and right delivery of the Cargo in cash.

Ship to be loaded and discharged at the rate of not less than 150 Tons per working day, weather permitting. Sundays and Holidays and Accidents excepted.

And Ten Days on Demurrage, over and above the said Laying Days, at 20/- per day.

The days for loading and discharging shall, if desired by Affreighters, be averaged with a view to save or to reduce Demurrage.

An Address Commission of 2 per cent. is to be paid to Charterers and to be deducted from the Freight on settlement.

Ship to have a lien on Cargo for Freight, Dead Freight and Demurrage.

The Captain to telegraph his sailing from his last Port of Discharge, to Owners to employ the Stevedores appointed by the Charterers, at Ship's expense, on customary terms.

Five per cent. Discharge on the gross amount of Freight and Demurrage under this Charter Party is due to

by the Steamer on the day of the agreement hereof, ship lost or not lost.

No other Cargo to be shipped under Penalty of £100, unless authorized by Charterers.

Penalty for non-performance of this Agreement, estimated amount of Freight.

THE CAPTAIN TO APPLY TO *WILLIAM GALFA*

AT SUSA, SEAX, GABES OR SKIRA, FOR CARGO AND CUSTOMS BUSINESS ON USUAL TERMS, *at*

extending 100 frames.

Captain to have liberty to take cargo in upper side bunkers

provided same are thoroughly cleaned from coal dust, & bales

not to be broken. Captain to protect deckload with tarpaulins

or canvas.

Witness to the Signature of

Witness to the Signature of

(s) Perry Bury & Co
24/9/91

By authority as agents
(s) J. A. Finzi & Co

We certify this to be a true copy of the Original Charter-Party in our possession.

The Steamer to be entered and cleared at the Custom House at the Port of Loading and Discharge

as above

Charterers have liberty to discharge at any port or ports as ordered at outward.

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- A.G.T.** Archives of the Tunisian Government held at the Dar al Bey, in Tunis. A large quantity of correspondence covering the period before (mainly in Arabic) and after the establishment of the French Protectorate. The most useful material on the alfa trade is in Series E, carton 64 and carton 233.
- M.A.E.** Ministere des Affaires Etrangeres, Quai d'Orsay in Paris. Documents covering all political and commercial aspects of French north Africa. Correspondence Politique, Memoires et Documents
- S.H.A.T.** Service Historique de l'Armee de Terre, Vincennes, Paris. Mainly military records, particularly strong on the French military campaign in Tunisia (and Algeria) the archives also include the reports from the Affaires Indigenes and the Bureau des Renseignements who submitted a number of reports on Tunisian tribes. Written around the time of the French occupation of Tunisia, these give an interesting, if not always precise, account of the towns, villages and tribes

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