The Regency of Tunis, 1535–1666

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GENESIS OF AN OTTOMAN PROVINCE IN THE MAGHREB

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This book is a study of the emergence of modern Tunis starting in the sixteenth century, conducted through a reexamination of the Ottoman occupation of the ancient Hafsid Ifriqiya. I trace the long process of the establishment of the Regency of Tunis, both its territory, through the gradual solidification of what had been loosely defined borders, and its society. The territorial and social identities of this new province were marked by many distinctive characteristics in terms of its relationship with Istanbul: the new borders of the regency were drawn as an imperial province, and individuals originating from throughout the vast territory of the Ottoman Empire settled in Tunis and succeeded in creating a new elite. These people could be categorized into two groups: Muslim Turks coming from the vast Anatolian plateaus, and those who had been captured by pirates—Christians by birth who had converted to Islam and thus were also considered Turks. Belonging to this latter group was Mourad Coursou, founder of the Mouradite house and a product of the underworld of captivity.

Under the Ottoman Empire, Tunis became a meeting place for these people with unique pasts, who, in spite of their varied geographic and religious backgrounds, were able to form kinship ties through intermarriage and to improve their standing through alliances with powerful local families. These new arrivals secured wealth and seized political power; thus, poor soldiers from the Anatolian plateaus as well as Mediterranean renegades were able, in a very short time, to form the new nobility of the Regency of Tunis. It is this complex process—the interaction of the social with the political and the religious—which we try to follow here.

The precise contours of the Regency of Tunis were produced by a rapidly changing situation, one marked by a series of fits and starts, that
must be reconstructed, even if this requires going back in time and rethinking traditional periodizations in order to better understand the sixteenth century, with its crises and its upheavals, as a fundamental moment of transition. For a sixty-year period, from 1530 to 1595, it is difficult to delineate the exact borders of the Hafsid territory of Ifriqiya. The period of July and August of 1574 seems to have represented a major shift, with the capture of Tunis and La Goulette, the departure of the Spanish and the last Hafsid rulers, and the installation of the Ottoman Turks. This important military victory did not mean that the Ottomans controlled the territory completely; rather, it initiated a difficult period during which the new authority strove to establish itself.

Historians have traditionally divided Ottoman history into three chronological phases beginning with 1574: the period of the pashas (1574–91); the period of the deys (1591–1631); and the period of the Mouradite beys (1631–1702). This chronology highlights the weakening authority of the pashas and the Turkish deys, in favor of the Mouradite beys. Such a convulsive succession of rulers suggests an effort to establish indigenous identity in opposition to the foreign Turks. This work proposes an alternative chronology, one that begins in 1535 and ends with the death of Hamouda Pasha Bey in 1666. It returns to the founding of Algiers by Barbarossa and its consolidation by Khayriddine as part of the project to create a Maghrebi state under Ottoman control, in which the Andalusian population would form the linchpin. The military victory of 1574 would in this context have been one step toward the ultimate aim of the great corsairs, which their successors continued to pursue until 1587. But this plan failed. Instead, three oujaks, or provinces, were established in the Maghreb: Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis. They were autonomous from one another but shared a common fate, and people circulated among them with incredible frequency. After being caught in the pincers of both the Turks and the Spanish, the territory of Hafsid Ifriqiya shrank considerably. Tunis fell sometimes under the rule of Algiers and sometimes of Tripoli. When the sultan caliph decided to bring an end to the unity of the three oujaks of the Maghreb, each of the three embarked on its own political and social path. Borders that had been fluid and ambiguous began to solidify. The ruling powers that established themselves in the three cities were distinct from one another, and their destinies depended, in part, on the men who governed them. The features of each province began to take form, accentuated by geographical conditions that promoted increasing centralization in the Regency of Tunis.
A Difficult Reconstruction of Historical Events

Reconstructing events, establishing a chronology, and identifying individual men and women are necessary steps toward renewing and refining readings of macrohistory. This is an essential but difficult process, because the sources do not always answer the questions being posed. There is also the problem of local sources from this long, blurry era, during which the end of Hafsid rule, Spanish occupations, tribal insubordination, the rise of Marabout powers, and Ottoman interventions all coincided. Tunisian chronicles, which were often written much later than the events they describe and which build off one another, constitute the bulk of local sources in the absence of official documents dating back to this period. Nevertheless, it is possible to gain “new” insights from these sources if we rethink the way that we use them. There is also a formidable collection of narratives from European travelers, diplomats, and former captives, which historians have used with eagerness, given the gaping void in local sources. And yet, despite the detailed work done by these authors, their stories impose a version of the facts heavily shaped by their authors’ biases. I am not suggesting that these sources lack objectivity, but merely underlining that, in common with all writers, the authors of these narratives describe local political institutions and their mode of operation through an individual lens. I will bring a different reading to official Spanish, Italian, and French sources that have previously been published in historical reviews, and I will make use of important Turkish documents that have been translated into Arabic. This deliberately descriptive approach will allow for a precise reconstruction of historical events, in order to better recreate several episodes, with a focus on the long demise of the Hafsids (1535–74) and the so-called period of the pashas (1574–91). We discover that the three ruling powers—the pashas, the deys, and the beys—were overlapping, not successive dynasties, and that the beys and the deys were linked by strong family ties. If these family relationships have escaped attention until now, it is because scholarship wasn’t concerned with the roles of women. The reconstruction of marriages and matrimonial alliances will allow us to identify the houses—the dars and the bayts—which were formed by both symbolic and material inheritances, and which enabled parvenus to access nobility. This notion of a “house,” which relies on an analysis of kinship, strategies of inheritance, and the transfer of power, will enable us to understand the political and institutional landscape and begin to make sense of the social cohesion of this formative period.
The Ottoman-Turkish occupation was accompanied by significant new diversity in the population. How were the newcomers identified? What ties united them? What sorts of relationships did they have with the authorities? Should our textbooks continue to list each new group on top of the many others that have populated Tunis? Should we not instead attempt to capture the dynamics of these various groups, the processes by which they construct their identity, and the manner in which they define themselves and their relationship to power? The affiliation of the Regency of Tunis with the Ottoman world established a new configuration that gave each group of new arrivals a political position, both within and outside the corridors of power, in lasting or temporary alliances. These fluid and cyclical dynamics must be identified in order to understand the connections between society and power. We will not look at them in their macrohistorical form, however, but by focusing on marriages, matrimonial alliances, and women’s roles in political networks. In opting for a social analysis of power, we aim to reconsider the place of family ties in establishing inheritance, access to spheres of power, and even the acquisition of “titles of nobility.” Contrary to what took place in nobiliary societies in which social belonging was linked to birth and marriages subject to strict social and religious control, the Muslim southern Mediterranean was distinguished by a different set of practices that this work attempts to disassemble: in this world, any adventurer could attain a position of authority if circumstances placed him in the proximity of power. Once such an individual had reached the top of the social hierarchy, the discourse surrounding his legitimacy would be constructed a posteriori.

The historian is a product of his or her time. At a moment in which history thinks less in terms of national identity, this study departs from the path that locates the formation of the state and the modern nation in the opposition between the Turks and the indigenous populations. If a Turkish identity existed, as we shall see, it was as a political identity and a generic term for all those who fell under the Ottoman banner. Moreover, local populations cannot be defined only by their indigeneity, as this designation did not correspond to their own self-perception: they identified first and foremost with their familial or tribal affiliations, and then with their cities or their lands (the watan); and for nomads, with their eponymous ancestors and with their rangelands. The respective imaginations of local populations did not extend beyond these familiar territories and the kinship ties that linked them to their groups, whether these ties were real, as in the case of the extended family, or imagined, as in the case of the tribe. The territory of
these communities was not that of the state, and the difference would per-
sist for a long time. The former corresponded to ancestral lands and carried
an emotional charge so strong that its inhabitants would give their lives to
protect it, while the latter was a political construction of a central authority,
made by taking hold of territory that was not necessarily continuous and
controlling it through coercive means, with the help of a mobile army that
travelled throughout it, collecting taxes and demanding signs of submis-
sion. This connection of politics to territory explains its great elasticity
and how insurrections and uprisings challenged its limits. It requires the
historian to begin not with a defined territory constantly being brought
into question, but with the visions carried by those who contested the land.

Over the course of the contentious sixteenth century, many protago-
nists coveted this territory and produced different visions for it. The vision
of the Spanish—who sought to isolate the coast and establish a string of
fortresses, the presidios, to supply and protect their Mediterranean fleet—
would have transformed Ifriqiya, cut off from its coast, into a region with
its back to the sea, facing the Sahara. The great corsairs, ‘Arrouj and Khay-
riddine, for their part, hoping to establish themselves on both shores of the
Mediterranean, sought to unify the coasts from west to east and to found
a republic of the sea populated by Andalusian settlements, under the control
of Algiers and the protection of the Ottoman Empire. Faced with these two
colonizing projects, the impoverished local powers chose to submit more to
the Spanish than the Turks, while the tribal leaders granted their allegiance
to one or the other according to the interests of the moment. In this unsta-
bile situation, the Maghreb remained unmapped (apart from coastal charts
drawn by the Spanish); it would be unfounded to speak of defined territo-
rial powers. From Fes to Tripoli, regions both large and small escaped the
control of the central powers and developed autonomously, making space
for new configurations of power.

To better grasp the drama of this century, I have chosen to situate this
study more widely, in the context of the Mediterranean world, if not of the
world as a whole—an ancient world as well as a new one that had just been
discovered, and was ushering in so many revolutions, even in small nations.
At this moment in history, the Mediterranean world was highly complex and
its political situation had global ramifications. The historian Fernand Brau-
del masterfully described the globalized world of the sixteenth century, and
proved that local histories could only be understood in the context of signifi-
cant innovations in technology, economics, and ideas throughout the century.

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