



AS-SAGHIRA BEN HAMIDA, *Tārīkh al-Baḥr fī Tūnis wa-Dhākiratuh fī al-Fatra al-Ḥadītha: Bayn al-Manṭūq wa-l-Maktūb* [The History and Memory of the Sea in Modern Tunisia: Between the Oral and the Written] (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024), pp. 271.

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The history of the sea has long captivated researchers, from Carthaginian experts¹ to scholars of the colonial period and beyond.² Research on the early modern period explored piracy, prisoners, and maritime spoils. Over time, however, research expanded to maritime trade, smuggling, maritime navigation, local fishing, the role of the sea in Tunisians' daily lives, and the official naval fleet of the Regency of Tunis.³

The modern era in Tunisia is defined by two significant developments. The first was the rivalry between two major Mediterranean powers, the Ottomans and the Spanish who sought to expand their territories and assert dominance over the region, thus fuelling piracy during the latter half of the 16th century, with the Tunisian coast serving as a crucial launchpad. The second began with the 1881 French occupation of Tunisia in 1881, exposing the disparities in terrestrial and maritime military technologies in favour of the European colonial powers.

As-Saghira Ben Hamida's work explores the relationships between Tunisia's coastal communities and their surroundings, and their contribution in developing or importing local maritime technologies.

Traditionally, research on the region's modern history has relied on a variety of sources, primarily archival documents, newspapers, and periodicals, along with biographies, histories, and Arab and foreign travelogues. However, Ben Hamida explores the sea through a combination of historical records and fieldwork, including observation and interviews with individuals working in the maritime sector.⁴ Through this methodological diversification, the author was able to exceed the limits of the modern period and trace the continued use of ancient maritime techniques and vernacular vocabulary, preserved by memory and still in use today.

The book is divided into three sections, each further subdivided into two chapters. The first section examines the sea and Tunisia's maritime communities.⁵ The second explores the history of maritime

¹ Mohamed Hassine Fantar, "Les divinités marines chez les phéniciens-puniques," in: Pierre Chantraine (dir.), *l'école pratique des hautes études*, 4ème section, Sciences historiques et philologiques (Paris: Centre de recherche et d'histoire et de philologie, 1965), pp. 547-549; Mohamed Hassine Fantar, "La Tunisie et la mer," *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*, no. 7 (1997), pp. 79-88; Abdelhamid Barkaoui, *La marine carthaginoise: Approche des activités militaires des carthaginois sur mer depuis les origines jusqu'en 146 Av. JC* (Tunis: l'or de temps, 2003).

² Abdelwahed al-Mokni, "al-Ma'arik wa-l-Sariqat al-Bahriyya bi-Sāhil Šafāqis fī al-Fatra al-Mu'āsira," in: Abdelhamid Fihri (ed.), *A'māl al-Nadwa al-Dawliyya al-Insān wa-l-Baḥr; May 7-8-9, 1999* (Sfax: Publications of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities; Cercina Center for Research on Mediterranean Islands, 2001); Samir Borchani, *Minā' Šafāqis khilāl al-Fatra al-Isti'māriyya* (Sfax: Taparura Publishing House, 2017).

³ See, for example: Taoufik Bachrouch, *Course et corsaires en Tunisie dans la première moitié du 17ème siècle* (Tunis: Edition arabesques, 2020); Leila Zaghdoud, *al-Bahriyya al-Tūnisīyya fī Qarn 1782-1881* (Tunis: Kalma for Publishing and Distribution, 2022); Farid Khacharem, *al-Ḥayāh al-Yawmiyya bi-Jihat Šafāqis khilāl al-Nisf al-Thānī min al-Qarn al-Tāsi 'Ashar* (Sfax: Mohamed Ali Publishing, 2022), p. 211.

⁴ The historian of the modern period generally relies on traditional research sources and makes little use of interviews and surveys, given the temporal distance from the period being examined and the lack of access to people who took part in the events concerned.

⁵ Ben Hamida, pp. 25-95.

technologies, both local and imported.⁶ The third presents the author's fieldwork findings, laying out the spoken and the everyday verbal lexicon.⁷

The author divides the Tunisian coast into three fishing zones, based on their natural characteristics, marine resources, and the predominant fishing techniques. The first zone comprises the northern coastline, extending from Tabarka through Bizerte to Cape Bon. The second covers the eastern coast, from the southern Gulf of Hammamet to the beginning of the Mahdia coast. The third encompasses the Gulf of Gabès.

The author stresses the importance of geographical and natural factors in attracting human settlements to the coast, emphasizing how marine topography facilitates navigation and anchorage of ships.⁸ These communities actively harnessed their environmental resources to develop maritime technologies, leading to the emergence of "an integrated system known as the marine fishing system, which unites 'sailors' together with their marine environment and the methods they use to exploit it".⁹

These diverse maritime communities can be categorized into two main groups. The first consists of local coastal populations that have inhabited Tunisia's shores since antiquity, later reinforced by the arrival of Arab Muslims. Over time, they established many coastal cities, some arose as extensions of naval military outposts and caravansaries. These settlements gradually evolved into urban centres, where residents relied on both land and sea to sustain economic activity.¹⁰

Among these communities were the inhabitants of the Kerkennah and Djerba islands in the Gulf of Gabès, renowned for their seafaring expertise. They engaged in piracy, fishing, and maritime trade, while also mastering various sea-related professions and crafts, including *reyasa* [ship piloting], shipbuilding, and the manufacture of fishing traps designed for the region's shallow waters.¹¹ Many studies have highlighted this unique feature of the Gulf of Gabès, known for its undersea terraces interspersed with valleys.¹²

Natural and human factors alike have contributed to the invention of local fishing techniques and boats. Residents resorted to palm trees, olives, sedge grasses, and clay to build trapping systems like the *charfia* and *damassa*, as well as boats such as the *ashtam*, one of the oldest known vessels in the Kerkennah archipelago. The author also addresses communities that depended on lakes, notably the Lake Bizerte and the Bibane Lagoon, where traditional fishing methods were practiced until the late 19th century, when foreign powers began exploiting these resources.¹³

The second type of community consists of foreign settlers. The Middle Ages mark the roots of external ambitions to exploit Tunisia's marine resources, particularly the coral reefs surrounding the Tabarka Peninsula. As early as the 12th century, European powers sought agreements that would grant their merchants access to these coral fields.¹⁴ The first to benefit were Genoese merchants, whose influence expanded in the 17th century, thanks to an investment policy based on populating Tabarka with Genoese immigrants and those from other Italian cities.

Foreign dominance over the coral trade intensified in the 18th century when a French rival emerged, challenging the Genoese monopoly. This shift ultimately led to the decline of the Genoese firm, prompting

⁶ Ibid., pp. 97-142.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 143-230.

⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 103.

¹² See: Moncef Bourbou, *al-Masālik al-Baḥriyya al-Wāqī'a 'alā al-Sāhil al-Janūbī li-Jazīrat Jirba Khilāl al-Fatra al-Wasīta al-Muta'akhhira: Wāqī' al-Jughrāfiyā al-Ṭabī'iyya wa-Waqā'i' al-Tārīkh al-'Askarī*, in: Salem Mokni (ed.), *Min Sirt al-Ṣughrā ilā Sirt al-Kubrā*, Vol. 1 (Sfax: Aladdin Bookstore, 2019), p. 29.

¹³ Ben Hamida, p. 69.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 72.

Genoese residents to abandon Tabarka and relocate to Bizerte to work. As a result, the exploitation of coral remained largely under the control of foreign companies, with little participation from Tunisians in this vital maritime activity.¹⁵

Ben Hamida's book also examines the large-scale exploitation of tuna fisheries, which began in the 19th century. Tuna fishing waters were spread across different areas along the Tunisian coast, including Monastir (north of Mahdia), Kelibia (in the Gulf of Hammamet), and Bizerte.¹⁶ Italians, and to a lesser extent the French, gradually imposed their control over tuna fishing by securing multiple agreements with the Tunisian state between 1826 and 1877. These agreements ultimately allowed them to monopolize specific marine activities with high economic returns. By the 19th century, the influence of foreign communities had reached its peak, driven by the growing European population in Tunisia.¹⁷

Maritime communities, over time, developed a range of techniques. The first pertains to marine fishing methods and techniques, including the traditional *tila* trap used in deep waters along the northern coast. In contrast, fishermen in the Gulf of Gabès use various types of fixed traps such as the *cherfia*, designed to exploit the region's shallow water and tidal movements.¹⁸

Tunisian coastal communities adapted fishing techniques to the species they targeted, such as pot traps for octopus and floating *damasa* nets designed to catch jumping fish like mullet. However, the 19th century saw a pivotal shift in fishing methods, as expatriate communities introduced imported technologies to meet growing export demands. While these foreign innovations aimed to boost production, they often overlooked the particularities of the maritime domain or local fishing customs.¹⁹

The second class of technology relates to navigation and its associated tools, with a focus on boat parts and related implements, such as *qlā'*, *qarbuṣ*, *miqdhāf*, among others. Ben Hamida examines their manufacturing and maintenance processes at dedicated workshops (*manāshir*), and describes locally sourced materials traditionally used in their construction.²⁰ She also showcases the diversity of local vessels, such as the *lūd* and *ṣandal*, alongside foreign-origin boats that were used on Tunisian coasts, such as the *mistico*, *kānūṭa*, *shabbāk* and *sākālūfā*.

As the author notes, the presence of so many varieties of foreign vessels along the Tunisian coast raises the question: does this stem from the local community's openness to foreign innovations, or is it due to the decline of endemic manufacturing and production techniques, which rendered local actors unable to keep up with technological developments?

While a book of this scope could not on its own address all aspects of the topic, the author has done well to address her research questions and to present an account of the various techniques of fishing and navigation present in Tunisia. Despite the difficulty of addressing the topic and the range of vocabulary at play, the examples the author presents and analyses demonstrate her extensive knowledge of extant sources and research, which she reinforced through extensive field visits along the coast, and through witnessing the daily life of the Tunisian seaman.²¹

However, the author provides only a brief discussion of the daily lives of maritime communities, particularly regarding sailors' clothing and food. Yet, the particular nature of maritime activity has influenced

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁹ Farid Khacharem, "Madkhal li-Dirāsāt al-Ṣayd al-Baḥrī al-Taqlīdī bi-Khalīj Qābis Khilāl al-Qarn al-Tāsi' 'Aṣhar," in: Mekni (ed.), p. 62.

²⁰ Ben Hamida, p. 110.

²¹ Ibid., p. 150.

not only technological advancements but also the culinary and sartorial traditions of coastal communities. This impact is evident in Tunisia's diverse contemporary cuisine, where seafood remains a staple in many households.

The author presents a comprehensive inventory of vernacular maritime terminology, which she refers to as "the fisherman's narrated memory".²² She traces the temporal and spatial evolution and geographic distribution of sea-related terms throughout the modern period, documenting elements of contemporary maritime vocabulary, and comparing them to the historical terminological corpus. This comparative analysis highlights both the continuities and variations in maritime discourse across Tunisia's different coastal regions.

Building on her previous research on the Gulf of Gabès region,²³ the author compiles two extensive glossaries documenting the region's most significant maritime terminology. The first, on navigation, catalogues 492 terms related to boats, maritime workers' ranks, and different wind directions. The second, devoted to fishing, includes 504 phrases, for a total of 996 entries making up the contemporary maritime vernacular used by Tunisia's sailors today.

However, the researcher overlooks a vital source integral to the daily verbal repertoire and collective memory of sailors: the colloquial proverbs, poems, and folk songs that circulate within the coastal communities under study.

Furthermore, while Tunisia was well-known for its tuna²⁴ and sponge²⁵ fisheries, these industries did not really thrive until the 19th century. This raises questions about their failure to flourish during the medieval and early modern periods, as well as the inability of coastal communities to advance their production techniques – issues that the book does not sufficiently address.

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²² Ibid., p. 145.

²³ As-Saghira Ben Hamida, "al-Muṣṭalaḥ al-Baḥrī al-Manṭūq bi-Sāḥil al-Janūb al-Sharqī li-l-Bilād al-Tūnisiyya: Namūdhaj li-Istiqrā' al-Marāji' al-Tārīkhiyya wa-l-Iqtisādiyya wa-l-Ijtimā'iyya," Master's thesis, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Sfax, 2011.

²⁴ Jean Ganiage, *Une entreprise italienne de Tunisie au milieu du XIX e siècle* (Paris: Presse universitaire de France, 1960), p. 7.

²⁵ Khacharem, "Madkhal li-Dirāsāt al-Ṣayd al-Baḥrī al-Taqlīdī bi-Khalīj Qābis Khilāl al-Qarn al-Tāsi' 'Ashar," p. 62.

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