Introduction

For the attentive traveler, a ride on the TGM – the Tunis, La Goulette, and La Marsa, a light railway linking Tunis with a string of suburbs along the Gulf of Tunis – can become an extraordinary trip through the country's history and culture. Not far from the end of the line in La Marsa are the remains of a sixteenth-century palace where Tunisia's rulers passed the summer months to avail themselves of the sea breezes and where, in 1882, the reigning bey signed the document establishing a French protectorate over his country. A mile down the tracks, the train reaches Sidi Bou Said, a village that welcomed Muslims fleeing from the Iberian Peninsula in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and that has been, for many years, a favorite haunt of local and European artists. The Museum of Traditional Music and Musical Instruments, located in what was the home of Baron Rudolphe d'Erlanger (1872–1932), honors the work of this French scholar who spent years helping Tunisian musicians preserve the Andalusian melodies and techniques brought to "Sidi Bou" by their refugee forefathers.

The next six TGM stops, spread out over two or three miles, are all in Carthage. Two bear the names of the ancient city's most famous father and son, Amilcar and Hannibal. Down the hill from the Amilcar station is a hotel built in the early days of the campaign to attract European tourists to the newly independent country's beaches. A few hundred yards west of the station, a World War II military cemetery – one of many British, French, German, and US burial grounds scattered across Tunisia along the battle lines of 1942 and 1943 – memorializes the men who fought in North Africa and shelters the remains of almost 3,000 American soldiers.

Just before pulling into the Hannibal station, passengers catch glimpses of Roman Carthage on either side of the railway. Towards the Gulf of Tunis sprawl the Antonine Baths, now an archeological park encompassing the vestiges of a complex of buildings commanding stunning views across the gulf to the Cap Bon peninsula. On the opposite side of the train lies an excavated neighborhood of Roman villas. The station between Amilcar and

Hannibal, Présidence, is close to the official residence of the president of the republic. Perhaps few commuters making their way to or from jobs in Tunis give a second thought to this juxtaposition, but it has no doubt reassured Habib Bourguiba and Zine al-ᶜAbidine ben ᶜAli, the only two chief executives since 1956, to dwell within the symbolic embrace of two such stalwarts of the Tunisian past.

Still another Carthage station, Byrsa, derives its name from the hill where the Carthage acropolis stood and where, by Virgil's anachronistic account, Queen Dido entertained the travel-weary Aeneas. After France established its protectorate over Tunisia, the Catholic Church erected the cathedral of Saint Louis atop the hill to commemorate the saint-king whose ill-fated thirteenth-century crusade foundered on the shores below. From the Byrsa station, an easy walk leads to the twin seaports of Punic Carthage, one for the city's merchant fleet, the other for its warships. A similar walk from the Salammbo station (named for the daughter of Amilcar who also provided Gustave Flaubert, one of many nineteenth-century European writers entranced by Tunisia, with the title for his 1862 novel) ends at the Tophet, a sanctuary at which, some scholars believe, child sacrifices were meant to appease the Carthaginian gods.

A few stops farther on is a station named for Khair al-Din Barbarossa, the sixteenth-century corsair captain whose ships struck fear into the hearts of European sailors – or perhaps for Khair al-Din al-Tunsi, the reform-minded prime minister of the nineteenth century who lived in France for a decade and believed that Tunisia had much to learn about the modern world from the nations of Europe. Inasmuch as the station is on the outskirts of La Goulette, the port from which both Khair al-Dins sailed on their quite different missions, the ambiguity seems appropriate enough.

Situated on the Gulf of Tunis where a break in the coastline provides a passage into the shallow Lake of Tunis – the gullet to which its name refers – La Goulette served for centuries as the port of Tunis. In keeping with its maritime links around the Mediterranean, the city had a cosmopolitan air and, even after independence, remained one of the most ethnically and religiously mixed communities in the country. The TGM passes beneath the massive battlements of the fortress erected in 1535 by the Spanish Hapsburgs to consolidate their conquest of the region. Down the street along the structure's southern wall, far enough away to be difficult to distinguish clearly, is an equestrian statue of Habib Bourguiba that once stood in downtown Tunis but was moved to this less visible location at the end of his presidency in 1987. Leaving La Goulette, the railway tracks turn westward to cross the lake on a causeway built by the Tunis Tram Company in 1905

to replace the longer route along the western shore of the lake which had been laid out by the Italian concessionaires who constructed and initially operated the line in the early 1870s. Arriving at the Tunis-Marine station after a run of some fifty minutes and fifteen miles, the train has passed by sites associated with three millennia of history.

A leisurely walk of an hour or two after exiting the TGM terminus builds upon the ride's introduction to Tunisian history. Just beyond the turnstiles is the main east–west thoroughfare of the "new" city, built in the nineteenth century on the mud flats bordering the lake to accommodate a European quarter outside the walls of the Arab city, the medina. A massive clock tower overlooks the busy Place du 7 Novembre 1987, named in honor of the "Historic Change" of that date when ben ᶜAli replaced the ailing Bourguiba as president after the latter had dominated the Tunisian political scene for more than half a century. Before the "Historic Change," the centerpiece of the square was the statue of Bourguiba now consigned to La Goulette.

Nevertheless, the avenue still bears the name of the ex-president. A wide central mall, with towering shade trees on both sides, divides the traffic along the length of the boulevard, creating a pleasant pedestrian space rendered visually attractive and odoriferous by the profusion of flower stalls and the ubiquitous men and boys selling jasmine nosegays. Some three hundred yards up Avenue Bourguiba from the TGM station is the National Theatre. Built in the early twentieth century as part of an entertainment center for European settlers that also included a casino, it became the home of Tunisian drama troupes whose productions fueled nationalist sentiments even as they elevated the level of cultural life. Two blocks farther on loom the most powerful symbols of seventy-five years of French colonial rule: the cathedral of St. Vincent de Paul and, directly opposite, the embassy of France which, before independence, was the seat of the resident general and headquarters of the protectorate administration. Between them, in the median of Avenue Bourguiba, is a statue of the renowned fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Khaldoun, a native of Tunisia. The main point of contact between the downtown business district and the medina lies just slightly more than a hundred yards farther west.

Only a few vestiges of the gates that once pierced the medina's walls remain. By far the best known is the Bab al-Bahr, or Gate of the Sea, which offered the most direct access to the lake. Today, it is more commonly known as the Porte de France. Just inside the gate is the embassy of the United Kingdom, where Her Majesty's consuls once schemed against their French and Italian counterparts in the competition to draw Tunisia into the European orbit. Nearby are the neighborhoods of "Little Malta," a

quarter once filled with immigrants from that island, who enjoyed British protection, and the mellah, which once housed the Jewish population. One of two streets plunging into the medina from the Porte de France is rue Jamᶜa Zaituna (Zaituna Mosque Street). It slopes gently uphill past an astounding variety of shops, many of them now specializing in items favored by tourists, to end at the main portal of the mosque. Built in the eighth century, Zaituna served not only as a place of worship, but also as the premier educational institution in Tunisia. Even after modern secular schools began to usurp that role in the nineteenth century, the mosque constituted the locus of Muslim intellectual life until its teaching functions were transferred to a faculty of theology and religious sciences at the University of Tunis in the 1960s. The winding streets and alleys around Zaituna offer numerous diversions, as the mosque is surrounded by the highest quality souks, or markets, in the city. Perfumes, spices, books, jewelry, and fine fabrics create a riot of colors and blend of aromas that set the precincts of the mosque apart as a unique environment. Not far from Zaituna, towards the southern edge of the medina, is the Tourbet al-Bey, which houses the tombs of the monarchs of the Husainid Dynasty (1705–1957).

A second major street traversing the medina from the Porte de France passes close by the mosque but ends at the center of secular, rather than religious, authority in the medina, the kasbah. The former palace of the ruler, the Dar al-Bey, now houses the prime minister's office, while buildings containing other government offices line the Place du Gouvernement at the western edge of the medina. Across the busy avenue that hems in the old city in the absence of its walls is the Collège Sadiqi. This still functioning legacy of Khair al-Din al-Tunsi endowed the sons of the Tunisian bourgeoisie with modern secondary educations and served as a veritable nursery of generations of nationalist leaders.

The final leg of this journey through Tunisian history entails a walk along the perimeter of the medina to the Bab Souika neighborhood, a thirteenth-century suburb of the medina, and from there to the Bab al-Khadra station of the Tunis Metro, a tram system begun in the 1980s to relieve urban traffic congestion and connect the city with its northern, western, and southern suburbs. Line Four, the western route, makes a stop at Le Bardo, the beylical palace where the 1881 treaty, giving France special rights in Tunisia and paving the way for the protectorate, was signed. The National Assembly now occupies a portion of the palace, its entry flanked by soldiers dressed in ceremonial uniforms of the nineteenth century. Other wings of the palace house a world-class museum exhibiting an array of Tunisian artifacts but

best known for its collection of mosaics, many from Carthage, others from sites elsewhere in Tunisia: Dougga, El-Djem, Thurburbo Majus, and Bulla Regia. Some experts rate the Bardo holdings as the finest collection of Roman-era mosaics in the world. In a country where layers of history blend so seamlessly, it seems fitting that their twenty-first century home be in a royal palace begun in the fourteenth century.

As extraordinary as is the historical richness and diversity observed in the less than twenty mile trip between La Marsa and Le Bardo, it is by no means unique to the region of Tunis. Although the entire country is only slightly larger than the American state of Florida, equally short journeys of similar diversity could readily be undertaken in such other urban centers as Sousse, Mahdia, Sfax, Gafsa, Kairouan, or Bizerte; among the towns and villages of the Majerda Valley west of the capital; or in Jarid oases of the southwest. How has it happened that the historical experience of what is now Tunisia has unfolded with such density and with so many traces of different cultures?

The southern curve of the African coastline at the Cap Bon peninsula has given Tunisia two windows on the Mediterranean Sea, one opening towards Europe, the other towards the Middle East. Since antiquity, this situation made it easy for peoples from both regions – Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Turks, Spaniards, Italians, Maltese, British, and French – to enter, and often take control of, the region. Its name has varied with time – Carthage, Africa (or, in its Arabized form, Ifriqiya), Tunisia – as its population has repeatedly absorbed waves of new arrivals from throughout the Mediterranean basin, all of them leaving their cultural imprints on the landscape and its inhabitants. But of all the rich legacies bestowed on Tunisia, that of the Arabs has unquestionably proven the most profound and enduring. The language, faith, and culture that the Arabs brought to the Maghrib ("the west," which to them meant all the lands beyond the Nile Valley) almost fourteen centuries ago have forged the innermost identity of the region's people ever since.

Nonetheless, the scant eighty-mile width of the Sicilian Channel separating that island from Cap Bon has assured the ready transmission of European influences as well. The rulers of the Mediterranean's northern shores sometimes competed with their counterparts in Tunisia for mastery of the lands bordering the sea. More commonly, however, they imposed their political and economic will on northern Africa, absorbing it into the Roman, and much later the French, empires. Only on rare occasions, such as at the height of the Carthaginian era in the sixth century BCE or during the rule of the Aghlabid Dynasty in the ninth century CE, did political

entities based in what later became Tunisia turn the tables and make European territory their own.

But whatever the nature of the relationship between Tunisia and its neighbors at any given historical moment, the land was awash with an array of exogenous influences. Contemporary Tunisians take great pride in their ancestors' skill in blending the many stimuli to which they were exposed into their own distinctive culture. Tunisia's modern history clearly reveals how extensively key challenges confronting the country have elicited responses grounded in concepts and approaches that draw on the full spectrum of the nation's cultural inheritance. An appreciation of the relative strength and popularity of Western versus Arab-Islamic influences at any given moment, of how various segments of the population assessed those influences, and of why they held the views they did, can facilitate our understanding of the country's recent past.

In the modern era, four recurrent themes that have determined the trajectory of Tunisian history well illustrate the interplay of these influences. In the telling of that history, this book weaves together the most salient components of all four – a mix that varied with changing times and circumstances. The themes are (1) the effort to create a political environment deemed acceptable by rulers and ruled alike; (2) the endeavor to modify or, in some cases, eradicate traditional beliefs and practices deemed to impede "progress" while, at the same time, retaining a national identity rooted in the precolonial past; (3) the attempt to foster economic growth sufficiently vigorous to diminish dependence and provide a stable platform for political and social development; and (4) the quest to formulate an artistic tradition mirroring the many divergent inputs the country has undergone.

Modern Tunisia has experienced rule by an indigenous monarchy, colonial control as a French protectorate, and an independent republican government. Early in the protectorate era, Tunisians, many of them veterans of precolonial campaigns to reform the political structure or their protégés, sought a greater voice in their governance. At first, they petitioned for the same rights and privileges enjoyed by European residents of their country. The failure of France to satisfy that appeal led to demands for the termination of French rule altogether. The most successful leaders of the anticolonial struggle utilized ideas and techniques learned as a result of their experiences with Europe and Europeans to build a movement whose insistence on acquiring the assets of the West while still preserving Tunisia's Arab and Islamic cultural inheritance resonated with a broad spectrum of the population. As a result, they were well positioned to mold, and then to dominate, the political system that emerged after independence in 1956.

By the 1970s, however, waning popular enthusiasm for the secular, single-party, authoritarian regime they had put in place produced calls to overhaul the political system with an eye towards restraining executive power and promoting pluralism. But it was not until 1987 that the former nationalist chief Habib Bourguiba, who had been acclaimed "president for life," left office. The extent to which ben ʿAli, his successor as president and party leader, had engineered meaningful and satisfying changes in the political arena remained uncertain as Tunisia entered the twenty-first century.

The most disruptive, unsettling, and far-reaching, but also certainly the most consequential, social debates in modern Tunisian history have centered on the value of traditional beliefs and practices. The enactment of legislation banning or restricting long-established customs and institutions, often in conjunction with other, subtler, forms of governmental pressure, has rendered compliance all but inescapable. From the precolonial era to the present, much of what successive governments have targeted as outmoded, and thus attempted to eliminate or radically alter, has been linked to Islam. Although the state has had the power to secure outward compliance with its will, its approach to religious matters has given a weapon to its opponents and has provoked serious backlashes. The protectorate authorities introduced French courts and schools. Comparable Tunisian (and Islamic) legal and educational institutions remained in place but, over time, lost much of their prestige and relevance in the public arena. Following independence, the nation's new leaders, virtually all of them products of French educations through which they had assimilated the philosophical underpinnings of Western culture, initiated sweeping social reforms allegedly designed to liberate Tunisians from beliefs and practices they saw as obsolete in the modern world and as deterrents to development. In terms of its breadth and impact, only Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's secularization of Turkey in the 1920s and 1930s offered a comparable parallel in the Muslim world. The fact that most Tunisians derived their worldview from different sources than did these Western-educated elites guaranteed that tensions accompanied such reforms. For many years, the power of the government prevented opposition to these policies from crystallizing, but when it did crystallize, it was often very successfully couched in terms of the necessity of preserving Tunisia's traditional Arab-Islamic heritage from an onslaught of imported values and practices.

The rulers of modern Tunisia adopted a variety of strategies as they strove to forge an economy with sufficient strength and stability to support their governments' political and social agendas. During the protectorate era, economic decisions made in Tunis invariably privileged certain segments of

the population, facilitating Europeans' acquisition of land and generally promoting the interests of European rural settlers and urban entrepreneurs over Tunisian farmers and merchants. Europeans held the richest, most profitable land in the country and controlled what few manufacturing enterprises emerged. Tunisians pushed to the margins of the economy often found themselves in straitened circumstances, but in singularly hard times, such as the 1920s and 1930s, especially in rural areas, many were unable to survive at all. As a result, economic discontent proved a powerful factor in galvanizing opposition to French control. With independence, the government's key economic objectives became the assertion of Tunisians' control over the economy and the intensification of the process of industrialization. To hasten reaching these goals, the state assumed a prominent role in the planning and management of the economy, as suggested by the 1964 addition of the adjective "socialist" to the name of the ruling party. Serious shortcomings in this arrangement, along with vigorous popular resistance to such policies as the collectivization of agricultural land and the establishment of cooperative farms, compelled the government to rethink its economic philosophy and, at the start of the 1970s, to replace it with another premised on dramatically different tenets. With the restoration of liberal principles and the development of an open, extroverted economy in which petroleum and tourism played major roles, some Tunisian capitalists fared extremely well, but most ordinary Tunisians did not. Class disparities widened as the despair of those experiencing a declining quality of life deepened. Shaken by deadly riots in 1978, 1980, and 1984, the government formulated the economic policy that it has pursued ever since, navigating between the two courses it had previously advocated.

The performing arts, painting, and literature provide a series of relatively little-studied cases revealing the impact on Tunisia of divergent cultural influences. Although theatrical works do not feature significantly in traditional Arab literary expression, Tunisians familiar with productions staged for European settlers began mounting Arabic versions of Western plays early in the twentieth century. In the inter-war years, their repertoires broadened to include more material by Arab authors, including Tunisians. At about the same time and as the result of a similar process, the first Tunisian novels written in Arabic also appeared. To these were added, towards the middle of the century, a flood of new fiction that adopted not only European form, but also European language. Many of the country's most distinguished novelists, whatever their language of expression, have taken as their subject matter the tugs of competing, and often conflicting, cultures that they encounter in their own lives.

Like drama and the novel, painting and sculpting were largely unknown in the traditional Arab-Islamic culture of North Africa. Some European artists lived in the protectorate, however, and many others visited it. Exposure to their work induced a handful of Tunisians to experiment as painters during the 1920s and 1930s. Following World War II, these men became the driving force behind the "School of Tunis." As its first masters, they fostered the creation of an authentically Tunisian artistic personality that valued the country's traditions and symbols but expressed them in modern forms. Tunisian musicians and musicologists manifested a similar respect for authenticity by preserving the nation's vocal and instrumental heritage as the radio and records popularized Western music throughout the world. Following in the footsteps of these pioneers, the post-independence generations of playwrights, actors, authors, musicians, and artists have called upon both Arab-Islamic and European traditions for inspiration, frequently fusing elements from both. Many have won accolades for their work at home, throughout the Arab world, and in Europe. But the facet of Tunisian artistic expression that has achieved the widest international recognition is the cinema. Even in their infancy, motion pictures attracted the interest of a few Tunisians, while foreign producers availed themselves of the country's abundant sunshine and varied landscape to make it a location for filming. More recently, the country's movie industry, which has often combined the talents of Arab and Western writers, producers, directors, actors, and technicians, has evolved into one of the most highly respected and successful in the non-Western world.

The precise point at which Tunisia's "modern" history begins is a matter open to interpretation, but the imposition of French rule in the 1880s unquestionably constituted a turning point of enormous importance. Thus, it is with an account of the environment that set the stage for the protectorate that this book begins.

CHAPTER 1

The march to the Bardo, 1835–1881

Fiercely independent tribes with a long history of rejecting outside control inhabited the ruggedly mountainous, heavily forested area of the Tunisian–Algerian frontier. Recurrent feuds, compounded by a border that ignored many traditional tribal boundaries, rendered the region dangerously volatile. During the 1870s, the local Algerian military authorities recorded well over 2,000 incidents, many of them involving incursions across the border.[1] Thus the February 1881 ambush of a Tunisian Khmir tribesman by a group of Algerians might well have faded into oblivion with the arbitration of local notables and the payment of blood money if the confluence of French ambitions in North Africa, the willingness of other European powers to accommodate them, and the inability of the Tunisian government to impede them had not made a pretext for a military campaign in Tunisia highly desirable.

When French military administrators in La Calle, Algeria, hampered negotiations among the tribesmen, their frustrations predictably erupted into new outbreaks of violence towards the end of March. Asserting the need to stabilize the region, units of the French army crossed the border on April 24, capturing the garrison town of Le Kef two days later. At the same time, French warships shelled Tabarka and then sailed east to the larger and more strategically located port of Bizerte. In accordance with orders he had received from Tunis, the city's governor surrendered on May 1 without offering any resistance. Strengthened over the following week by significant reinforcements from France, General Jules-Aimé Bréart prepared to move on Tunis itself. Persistent rain made the march longer and more difficult than anticipated, but Bréart finally reached Ksar Saʿid, the beylical palace at Bardo, on the western outskirts of the capital, on May 12. Anxious to complete his mission, he insisted upon an immediate meeting with Muhammad al-Sadiq Bey, at which he and Théodore Roustan, the French consul general, demanded the ruler's agreement – within three hours – to a document regulating Franco-Tunisian relations. In view of