Part I

"Families coming from the same stock . . ."

Peyssonnel, eighteenth century

1. ❧ Population: size, distribution, and migratory movements

The people, their number, their geographic distribution, and the relationship between them and the lands they occupy constitute the first symptom of the social conditions of production. As to their number, that is very hard to determine. Tunisia had no bureau of vital statistics until 1912, and no general census was conducted until 1921. The results of that first census were incomplete and questionable by virtue of its having been the first.

As of 1856, however, there was a systematic count of adult males when the head tax was restored. That survey provides a figure for the end of the period under present study: Around 1860 the population of Tunisia barely exceeded one million inhabitants. Although lower than estimates of contemporaries, this figure, established by Ganiage, is nonetheless perfectly acceptable.[1]

Earlier than that, we must make do with contemporary records, scanty for the eighteenth century, increasingly numerous for more recent periods, but always lacking a statistical basis and thus unreliable. Tunisia would appear to have had a population of two million during the first half of the nineteenth century, a higher number at the end of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth: between two and one-half and five million, according to MacGill, Frank, and Nyssen. While these figures are not acceptable as such, they do show, at the very least, that no demographic progress was seen by contemporaries during the nineteenth century; quite the contrary. In the same way, their estimations of the population of the capital – which like the preceding are products of suppositions and not of census takings – do not point to a vigorous development.

We shall return later to the subject of growth and the periodicity of demographic crises that Tunisia underwent (see chap. 6). For the moment, it is enough to remember that with a population of one million inhabitants, the average density was barely ten inhabitants per square kilometer; twice that number if, during a period of prosperity, the population increased to two million. This is a very low figure, if according

to Fernand Braudel, between 1300 and 1800 the kilometric density of the favorable zones of the earth varied between 19 and 47.5.

Situating the groups

The urban population was small, nomadic groups were more numerous than sedentary ones, and the different regions were not equally populated.

There is considerable difficulty in trying to establish a list of the cities of precolonial Tunisia. How does one determine a city? Quantitative criteria are inadequate. There was no dearth of agglomerations numbering a few thousand inhabitants covering a vast area, but these were not cities. Kalaa Kebira, which numbered 7,000 inhabitants around the middle of the nineteenth century, Kalaa Serira, Ksour Essaf, and Ksar Hellal, whose population was around 3,000 or 4,000, and other agglomerations of the Sahel were purely and simply villages. Conversely, centers of lesser dimensions and sparser population were tantamount to cities. Along with quantitative criteria, morphological data must be taken into consideration (architectural whole, fortified walls, buildings for trade and manufacture) as well as functional criteria. A city, in short, was a place where administrative, religious, and commercial activities were concentrated at the same time as ethnic and social diversity converged.

In fact, a combination of these three factors is still not enough. A city was less distinguishable by its urban characteristics than by its position within a network. Each sector of activity was organized according to a hierarchy in which the city stood at the top – which is suggested by the term urban "center." Thus in the domain of religion, each sedentary group had its mosque, *masjid*, but the Friday mosque, *jāmiʿ*, indicated a higher degree of social order. The elementary school, *kuttāb*, was found down to the level of the *dawār*, the tent village, but the *madrasa* (religious college) required an infrastructure and a staff that went beyond the needs and means of a primary social organism. As to the university, it existed only in Tunis. In the same way, in the economic sector, although cottage artisanry could be active in the city as well as in the country, only the city could support an entire body of trades grouped in particular quarters or streets. By thus breaking down each activity into its simplest elements, one can construct a table that on the one hand designates cities and on the other sanctions their classification (Table 1.1).

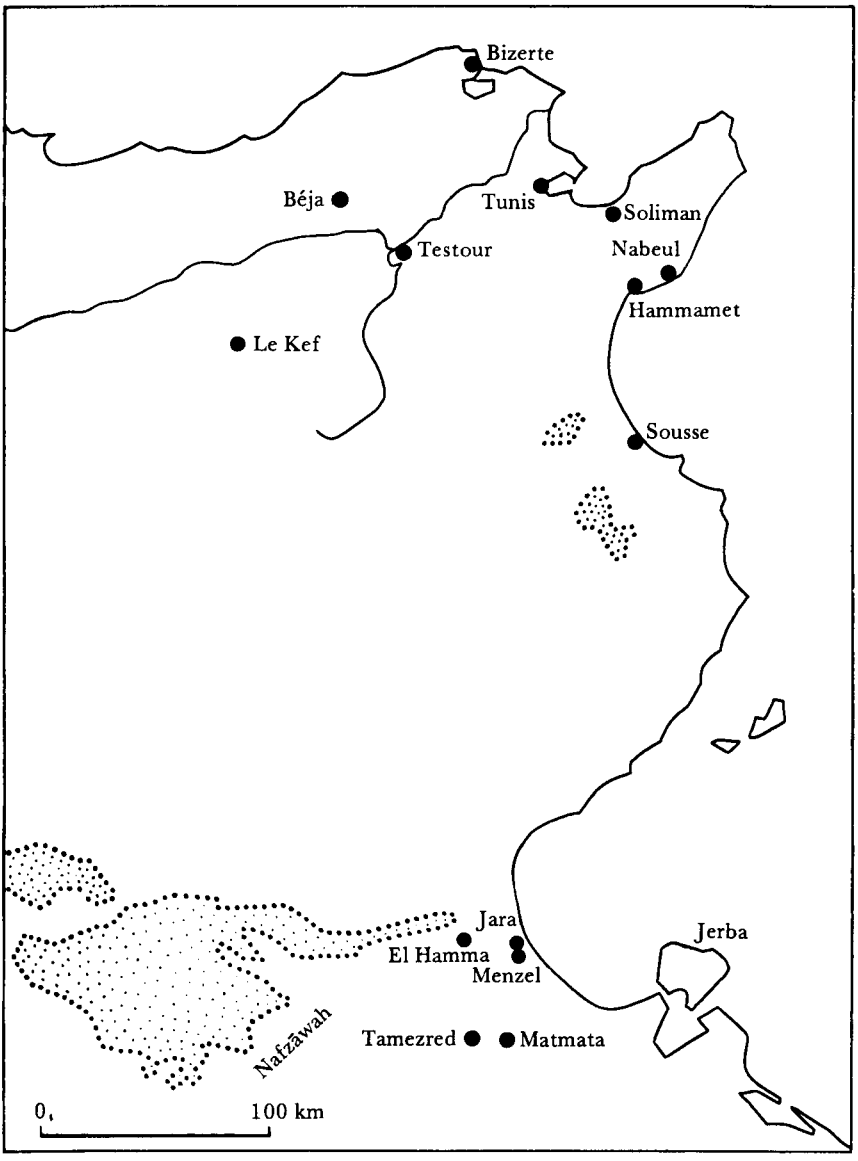
This table is insufficient for it does not take into account the likely changes that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It indicates only the broader characteristics and remains incomplete because information is lacking. It nonetheless makes possible certain affirmations: fifteen agglomerations were clearly urban – Tunis, Kairouan, Sousse, Sfax, Bizerte, Béja, Gabès, Nabeul, Monastir, Mahdia, Gafsa,

Table 1.1. *Hierarchy of Tunisian agglomerations*

	Designated a city	Presence of Turks	Presence of Jews	Male crafts	Administrative center	Walls	Fortress	Permanent bazaar	Jāmiʿ	Madrasa	Public baths	Caravanserai	University	Periodic market	Population in the 1860s (in thousands)
Tunis	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		80
Kairouan	+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+		+	+			15
Sfax	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+			10
Sousse	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+			8
Béja	+	+	+	+	+	+	+			+	+			+	2–3
Bizerte	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+							5
Gabès (Menzel + Jara)	+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+	+					4.5
Mahdia	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		+		+	+			4
Monastir	+	+	+		+	+	+				+	+			4
Nabeul	+	+	+	+	+			+		+	+		+		4
Le Kef	+	+	+	+	+	+		+		+					3
Porto Farina	+	+	+	+	+		+								
Gafsa	+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+						3
Hammamet	+	+	+	+		+	+								2
El Hamma de Gabès	+	+	+				+								
Tozeur	+			+	+			+							8
Zaghouan	+	+	+	+	+			+	+		+				
Mateur	+		+		+			+			+			+	1.6
Testour	+	+	+	+					+					+	2–3
Tebourba	+		+	+										+	2–3
Soliman	+		+	+					+					+	
Téboursouk	+				+	+									2–3
Nefta	+			+		+									8

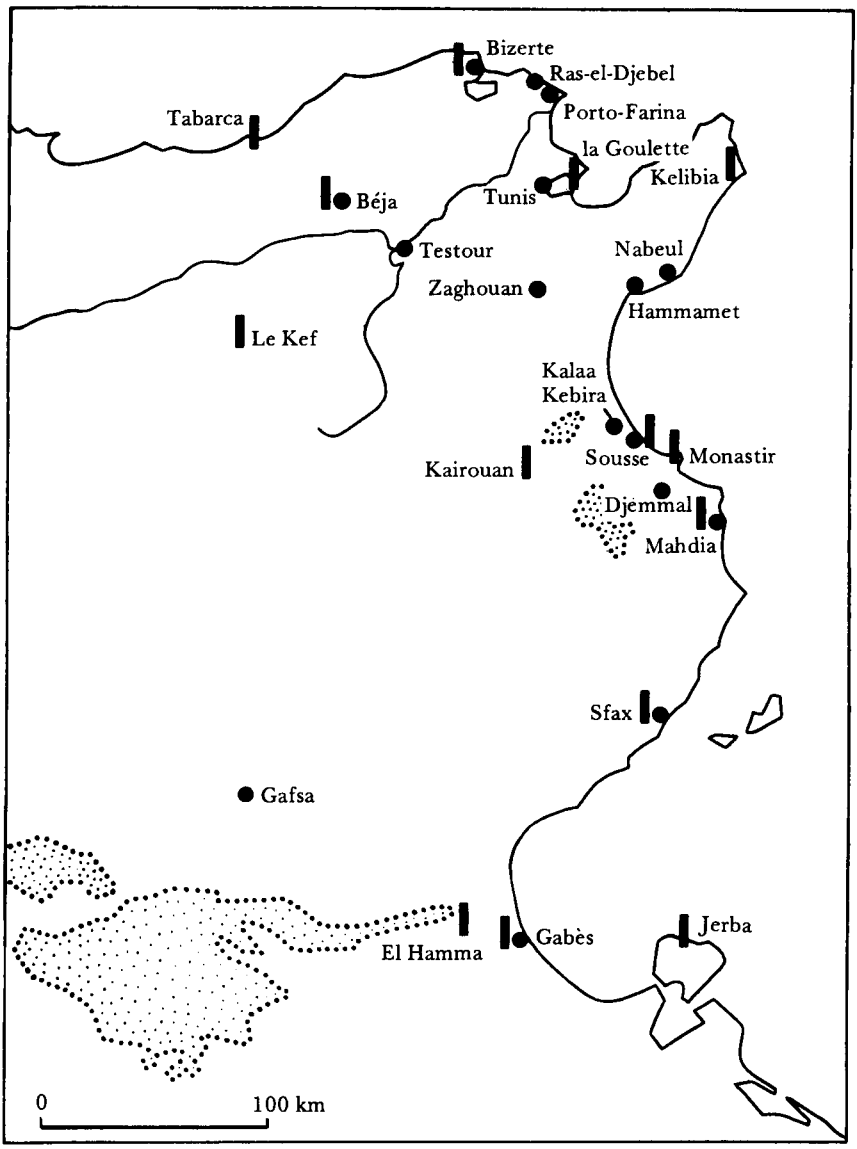
Tozeur, Porto Farina, Le Kef, and Zaghouan.* Beyond this, with Tebourba, Téboursouk, and El Hamma, a zone of uncertainty begins. Was Téboursouk really a city? It was indeed walled and was the seat of a fiscal district, but its population was homogeneous from an ethnic and religious viewpoint, as well as an economic one. Contemporaries called it a city. A number of similar centers were also lacking in certain urban characteristics. Other agglomerations were simply markets with no other urban qualifications. In the Sahel, Moknine, with 5,000 inhabitants, among them many Jews, a permanent market, and a specialized artisanry, had neither the other characteristics of a city nor the appearance of one.

*Convention followed in spelling of names: For place names the French and Tunisian names commonly seen on road signs and maps have been retained, whereas for personal and tribal names the transliterated Arab forms are used.

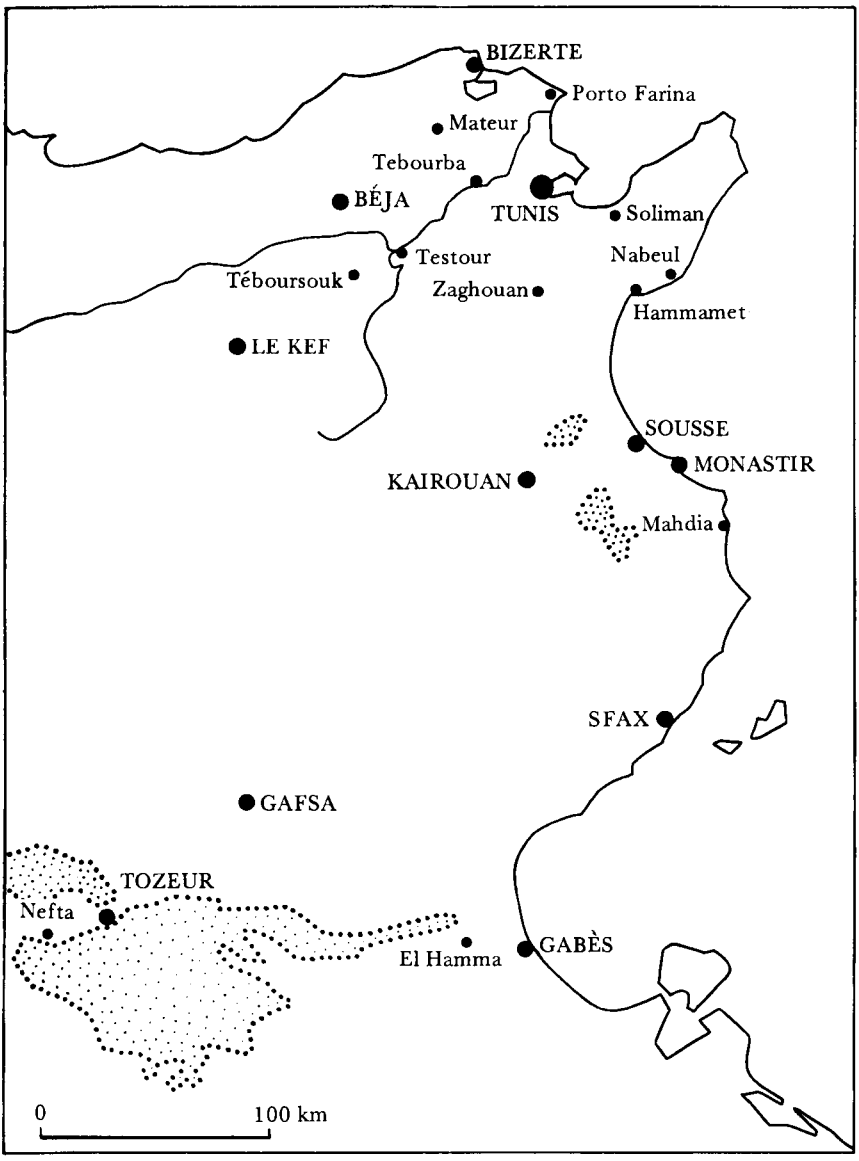


Map. 1.1. Concentrations of Jews in the eighteenth century according to fiscal records.

More populous than Sousse, Msaken, which held many *jāmiʿ*, had neither walls nor souk. Its activities included the cultivation of olives, religious studies, and wool weaving. "Dico città e dico male," said a nineteenth century author of Msaken.[2]



Map 1.2. Concentrations of Turks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Black blocks indicate presence of Turkish garrisons in the eighteenth century; black circles denote places where Turks and their descendants resided in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.



Map 1.3. Urban centers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (District seats are in capital letters.)

If we limit ourselves to those centers whose qualification as cities is incontestable, their number and quality of existence suffice to constitute an urban network. At the head, evidently, was the capital, followed by

regional metropolises: on the coast, Bizerte, Nabeul, and Sousse, particularly important for its busy bazaars, its production of fine cloth (which declined in the nineteenth century), and the commerce of its port. Farther south there were Monastir, similar to Sousse, an active little port whose population spilled over the ramparts into the suburbs, and Sfax, "a very pretty town," surrounded by huge walls, an industrious center whose people, in the words of a French writer, "are assuredly the wickedest in the kingdom,"[3] but who, according to a local historian, were the most devout of Moslems. This can be interpreted to mean that the Sfaxians were shrewd profiteers; they were also merchants, fishermen, and weavers. Farther south was Gabès, a twin city and the outlet for the great province of the south.

Inland the chain of cities was not as closely linked. Tozeur was the capital of the Jarīd, the annual gathering place of nomadic and sedentary people, a reasonable resting place on the pilgrimage to Mecca, where Maghrebians stopped if they had taken the southern route. It was the center of the textile industry of the entire regency and the residence of the bey when his fiscal expedition set out to collect taxes in the south. From Gafsa, farther north, it took a number of days – in a region where shady spots were scarce and far apart – to reach Kairouan, the ancient capital, repeatedly devastated in the eighteenth century, living in slow motion during the nineteenth, but still pulsing, not only with devout believers, but also with artisans of all kinds: tanners, saddlers, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, weavers, and many others. Due north of Tozeur, Béja hosted the winter camp whose arrival coincided with a great fair held by merchants and artisans from the entire country. A fortified town, the ancient Vaga had remained the leading grain market.

> Si deux Beggies étoient
> Assises en deux plaines
> Les grains surmonterioient
> Le nombre des arènes

is what people said about Béja in the capital.[4] In addition to these cities were large towns with less diverse activities and populations, and centers that, although lilliputian, were nonetheless cities.

Whether one counts generously or not, the urban population probably did not exceed 160,000 to 170,000 inhabitants, or 15–16 percent of the total population, a small proportion, and even smaller if one bears in mind that many of the townspeople also engaged in agriculture or horticulture. This is hardly surprising in a traditional and predominantly agrarian population. The vast majority of the population consisted of country people, tent dwellers, and villagers.[5]

If we situate the nomads and settled rural inhabitants in the territory of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Tunisia, we observe in the north,

along the valley of the Medjerdah and its affluents, a string of villages along an axis running from Le Kef to Tunis.[6] There were some twenty sites, many of which were revived by the Moors driven from Spain: the centers of Testour and Tebourba, already mentioned; the villages of Slouguia, Grich el Oued, Djedeida, Medjez el Bab. North of Tunis was another cluster of villages, near the littoral, stretching as far as Bizerte. There too a number of Andalusian refugees settled. In the opposite direction was a third settled region, also populated with Iberians, at the beginning and along the coast of Cape Bon.

These settled pockets were doubtless less populous and fewer in number than nomadic groups, of which there were more than twenty in the region of Le Kef, some twenty-odd in the area of Béja, among whom were the Nafzah, the Amdūn, the Ushtata, from whom the agents of the Compagnie d'Afrique bought wheat; the same number in the region of Téboursouk, with the *ʿarūsh kebār*, the "great tribes," the Awlād Abu Sālem, the Jundūbah, the Wartān, the Awlād ʿAyār, and so on. To this can be added the five or so tribes near Mateur and those that occupied Cape Bon. In northern Tunisia we see an inextricable blend of nomads and sedentaries. In central Tunisia, on the other hand, a segregation took place: On the coast there were more villages, in the interior, more tent dwellers. In fact, in the Sahel, the heavy concentration of villages was around Sousse and Monastir: twenty-four villages in the first canton – from Zriba in the north to Djemmal in the south – and twenty-eight in the district of Monastir, which is more coastal and more southerly. In the vicinity of Mahdia – in the eighteenth-century part of the district of Monastir – and in the region of Sfax farther to the south, village settlements thinned out and gave way to pastoralist tribes: the ʿAqarība, the Lawāta, and the Methallīth. But once across the littoral, the plain became the domain of the great tribes: the Jlāss, Qoʿūb, and Quazīn near Kairouan; the Frashīsh, Mājer, and Hamāma deeper into the interior. From Kairouan to Gafsa there was not a single village. But there were a few sedentary groups perched in inaccessible villages scattered throughout the mountainous area; a few *dashras* around La Kessera, a handful in Jabal Bargu, and a few more in Jabal Waslāt.

Sedentary life took over again in the south where villages proliferated from the Algerian border to the island of Jerba: around Gafsa, in the Jarīd, in Nafzāwah, near Gabès, and finally, in Jabal Matmata. And there were as many archipelagos of oases, surrounded everywhere by shepherd tribes: ʿAkkārah, Fatnāssa, Warghamma, Hazem, and others.

From the eighteenth to the nineteenth century there was neither a great wave of nomads nor a proliferation of villages. Only minor changes occurred in this overall picture. The Mahādhba, who in the nineteenth

century were settled in the region of Sfax, seem to have been in a more northerly position in the eighteenth; sedentary life lost more ground in central Tunisia with the dispersion of the Waslatiya in 1762. However, the other pieces on this checkerboard remained in place throughout the period, and even up to the beginning of the protectorate. As to earlier periods, one would like to be able to situate the groups and follow their movements, but history, less attentive than tax collectors, has kept track only of the most important ones, leaving undocumented most of the others.[7] It is nevertheless true, despite endless repetitions about the instability of nomadic tribes, that they maintained their location over a very long period of time.

And they maintained not only their location, but their strength as well. In the nineteenth century throughout the country, there was a higher percentage of nomads than settlers. It is true that pockets of settlements lay within the territory of certain tribes: these were *zāwiya*, settlements built up around the tomb of a marabout, inhabited by some members of the tribe, in some cases a number of families, which could attain the dimensions of large villages. During the nineteenth century, from the north to the south, there were more than sixty of them. Among the Wartān, which numbered 16,000 individuals, nearly a quarter of the tribe was settled in the nine *zāwiya* of the territory. Similarly, 5,000 members of the Awlād ʿAyār, of a total population of 25,000, were settled around the marabouts. However, the overall population of these settled groups did not exceed 25,000, which does not alter the proportion of nomads to settlers.

Do natural conditions account for the distribution of these two groups? In part, yes. The southern band occupied by settled group is at the boundary of the cultivation of date palms; only with the aid of irrigation can the olive tree be grown there. In the north, the last line of villages coincided with the zone of grain farming – practicable even without irrigation. Between the two is the zone given over to herding. In fact, irrigated farming would have been possible. In the north, where climate and terrain lend themselves to sedentary occupations, nomads were preponderant. The south, conversely, despite unfavorable natural conditions, harbored a much larger number of villages and settlers in the nineteenth century than did the north. Geographic determinism is thus misleading. History – the very long history of the settlements and migrations of these groups, which this present study cannot attempt to investigate – and sociology, to be discussed in later chapters, may well provide the key to this relationship.

Let us not, however, overestimate its rigidity. Tunisia was crossed by migratory currents that reinforced the regional contrasts already observed.