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## THE MEDINA OF GABES: A THREATENED ARCHITECTURAL AND URBAN HERITAGE

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### Abstract:

*The city of Gabes has been considered an important crossroads and a center of an old commercial activity for caravans and nomads since antiquity. This is in fact because it is famous for its unique coastal Mediterranean oasis. Coastal oases are essentially sources of great biological diversity and particular natural habitations, which altogether make an essential component of the cultural identity of the region. This key element of cultural heritage is unfortunately facing a lot of challenges which threaten its existence. The present study tries to understand the context of the evolution of the oasis dwelling and the traditional urban landscapes of the city of Gabes. It seeks to identify the typology of this traditional dwelling and characterize its main components. It also assesses its current state and the profound changes it is experiencing in an atmosphere of negligence from the side of state which has avoided adopting the principles of urgent intervention to promote, enhance it and preserve this dwelling against the undesirable effects of modernization.*

**Keywords:** Evolution; Oasis Habitation; Architectural Heritage; Urban Landscapes; Degradation.

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### 1. Introduction

Gabes, a famous coastal city of southeast Tunisia and a real museum of architectural and archaeological heritage of great national and universal value, is one of the most original oases of the Mediterranean. These coastal oases have been in fact been greatly enriched by cultural, architectural and urban contributions inherited from several civilizations. The great diversity of architectural techniques and the remarkable quality of the traditional environment and its exemplary adaptation to the climatic conditions are undeniable proofs of this diversity. These agro-systems created for several thousand years have lived long periods of glory before the sudden penetration of modern urbanization. As a particularly complex eco-social system, the oasis appears as an ambivalent space, not only attractive as a carrier of wealth and amenities, but also marked by strong natural and anthropogenic constraints generating competition, conflict and risk (Rejeb & Donadieu, 2009). Since the arrival of settlers in the city of Gabes, so-called 'modern' urbanization has constantly erased the cultural and landscape features of the local space, leading to its weakening and decay. The accelerated invasion of the oases, in complete contradiction with the modes of habitation and with local urban and architectural practices, is at the origin of a spatial and urban degradation and a remarkable socio-cultural and economic crisis. Thus, the accelerated

urbanization of these spaces disintegrates the originality of the oasis's cultural and urban landscapes and leads to the decrease and erosion of the architectural heritage.

This study aims at analysing the context in which urban landscapes in the oasis of Gabes evolved in a context of government disengagement and traditional oasis dwelling degradation. This article evaluates the strong changes in this habitation which is an essential component of the cultural identity of the region.

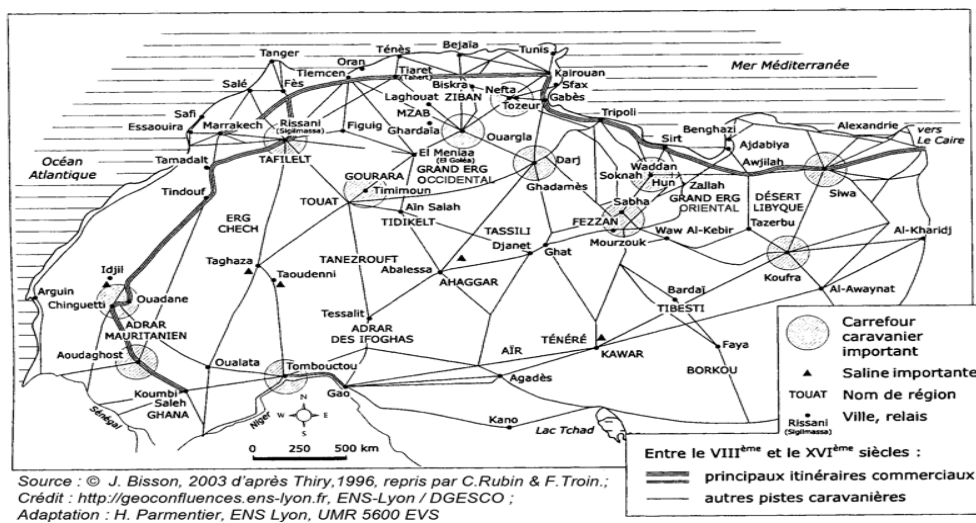
## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. The Urban Evolution of the City of Gabes

#### Gabes in Antiquity

The city of Gabes owes its existence to its strategic location and its coastal oases. It was not easy to exactly define its old location. Probably, the first created nucleus was located on the hill of SidiBoulbaba, indeed, Abid Bechraoui asserted that: “Tacapas was located on the hill of the sanctuary of SidiBoulbaba, a few hundred meters south of Menzel...” (Bechraoui, 1980). J. Hilaire confirmed: “The ancient city did not only cover the hills of SidiBoulbaba, it also extended to the site of the village of Menzel ... It is probable that the ancient city occupied a site wider than the perimeter of SidiBoulbaba, Menzel and Jara...” (Hilaire, 1900). In addition, questions arise as to the date and origin of the city of Gabes. “[...] Berber for some, she is a Phoenician foundation for others.” (Bechraoui, 1980) Indeed, the abundance of natural sources that have arisen in this semi-desert region has surely attracted “the indigenous populations who ... would have built the embryo of Tacapas ...” (Ibid). Its strategic location was quickly perceived by the Phoenicians who “upgraded the site by making Tacapas an emporium” (Ibid)

Then, it was taken by the Carthaginians who colonized it and gave more importance. After that, it passed to the Romans who made it a colony. A second advancement followed in the Christian era. Certainly, the strategic and economic interest played a big role in the valorization of the city; indeed several caravan routes were created allowing Rome to penetrate far into the Sahara (Fig.1).



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Figure 1 : Gabes : an important caravan crossroads

(Source : [geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr](http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr))

But the passage of vandals and Byzantine colonization left no traces; this is what explains the lack of information relating to this prosperous period (ibid.). The conquest of Gabes by the Muslims was between the years 34 and 50 of the Hegira (AH). The region has experienced significant economic and agricultural development that has been described in several works by Arab historians and geographers of the Middle Ages, such as Al Idrissi, IbnHawkal, Al Yaakoubi and Al Bekri who wrote in his book translated by De Slane: “Gabes is a large city surrounded by a wall of large stones and an ancient construction. It has a strong citadel, several suburbs, bazaars and caravanserais, a magnificent Djamea (mosque) and a large number of baths...” (Al Bekri, 1913). The former nucleus, called Menzel, forms a harmonious entity characterized by a place sheltering the various socio-collective facilities such as the mosque, the ‘Hammam’ and the ‘fondouk’, it ensures a dense and readable organization of the fabric. The building is located near the oasis and forms a clear and rigorous limit. The district of Jara is one of the suburbs of the city of Menzel.

### Gabes Under the French Colonization

During the colonization of the country, the French built their own urban city called ‘BabBhar’ occupying the edge of the oasis in the vicinity of the sea. This new district was characterized by an orthogonal plan in checkerboard, with two main channels bringing together the majority of services and commercial premises. During this period, the settlers directly noticed the strategic position of the city, considered as a desert gateway and a crossroads city. Along this maritime identity, the conquerors created one of the most important French military caserns by building several military camps in the city (housing up to 20,000 soldiers), in addition to an airstrip (aerodrome) which allowed them to control the maritime routes, land and Sahara all over southern Tunisia (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Military camps in the city of Gabes  
(Personal realization from the plan of Gabes 1942)

### Gabes After the Independence: The Policy of Industries and Services

Following independence, Gabes experienced an economic slowdown aggravated by the two floods of the Gabes Wadi in 1959 and in 1962 and “The growth of the districts of Jara, Menzel and

SidiBoulbaba was slow and the urbanization developed while turning its back to the sea and remaining open on the oasis ...” (Bayrem, 2015), given the nature of the Gabesian who is attached to the oasis which still occupies the main function of his city. However, the political decision has designated Gabes for the establishment of a major chemical plant. In recent years, the establishment of a university campus in the south of the city has constituted a pole of economic and cultural influence, but which has contributed with the chemical pole to an important urban extension (Tahar, 2006).

## 2.2. Methods

An analysis of the study site was mandatory, we opted for:

- 1) A historical knowledge of urban and oasis landscapes, practices and uses to ensure comparison between the old and the present.
- 2) A realization of an analysis and field observations to better understand the oasis inhabitants and their development.
- 3) The development of a database through the collection of photographs, images, plans, etc. in order to facilitate the analysis of the organization of the oasis inhabitants and the architectural components and to develop an idea about its transformation and degradation. In fact, photos represent the best device that makes citizens aware of their landscapes.
- 4) Social surveys on the uses and knowledge of oasis architecture as well as the methods of preservation and improvement of the architectural and urban heritage.

## 3. Results and Discussions

### 3.1. Traditional Oasis Habitation

The open oasis house of oasis corresponds to the type known under the name “Houch” or patio house around which is space is organized. These buildings are mostly single-storey, providing both a residential and agricultural functions. In fact, they represented a sort of extension to the agricultural parcel where activities related to the farm were practiced (raising goats, sheep and donkeys, drying tobacco and other ancillary works).

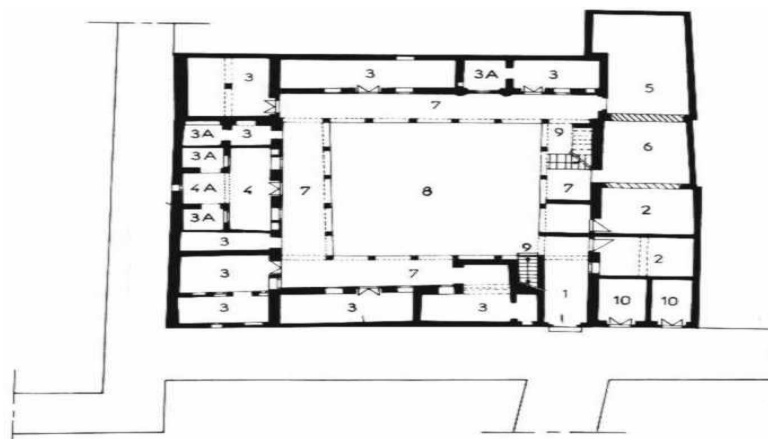


Figure 3: Ground floor plan of « Dar Khraief »

(Source: INP, 2004)

From Fig. 3 representing the plan of “Dar Khraief”, a typical building of the medina of Gabes, we can clearly identify the main parts of the oasis house which are:

**A main access door** high enough to allow the animals used in the oasis to transport crops brought from the oasis and elsewhere (Fig. 4). In fact, the front door is usually the only opening on the main façade of the house.



Figure 4 : Photo of a main access door of a traditional dwelling (Photo Lassoued, 2015)

- **One or two vestibules** representing a sort of partition that protects the intimacy of the household while providing shelter against the heat wave at nap time, while performing other functions that include: the head of the family uses it to receive visitors and the woman employs it as a workshop to do some housework alone or in the company of neighbors and relatives such as the preparation of annual provisions, wool weaving...
- **A big patio** for the accomplishment of certain household tasks and for the transformation of some products: the drying of dates, olives, pepper, etc.
- **The rooms** that are generally used for sleeping and storing goods and blankets and other everyday consumer products for the whole family, so that several married brothers as well as the head of the family can cohabit in the same house.
- In each house, there was a "**Makhzen**" which played the role of storeroom for the family. People had the habit of storing food stuff in anticipation of hazards. The most commonly stored commodities were dates, olives and cereals (wheat, barley, etc.). In addition, almost all homes had **wells** to collect rainwater for drinking and all day-to-day activities.



Figure 5: Frontal view of “Dar Khraief”

(Source: INP, 2004)



Farmers lived in the plots and the extended family cohabited on the same property but always kept a great harmony between the building and the palm plantations.

They became accustomed to using all the materials provided by the oasis to build and furnish their houses (trunks of palms for covering roofs and making doors, palms for fences and various utilitarian objects: baskets, hats, carpets, date kernels also served as food for animals, etc.) (CRDA, 2015). The cut stone was also used for the construction of the load-bearing walls.

### 3.2. The Transformation of the Urban Landscapes of the City

#### The deterioration of Oasis Dwellings

As seen in the photos (Fig.6), the cement brick constructions have replaced the traditional houses around the oases because of the fragmentation of these houses and their transformation into several houses usually quite disfigured. In the same way, oasis dwellings have witnessed the alterations of the random interventions of the residents who do not respect the architectural specificity by using materials foreign to the traditional prescriptions (introduction of industrial brick, cement, steel, wall tiles with industrial painting and non-matching colors), by adding new spaces that do not conform to the typology of old structures or by carrying out commercial activities unrelated to the vocation of these dwellings.



Figure 6: Brick and concrete constructions invading the Medina (Photo Lassoued, 2015)

The oasis habitation has undergone typological transformations that are volumetric, structural and spatio-organization. The origins are diverse and not necessarily related to the abandonment of some traditional building materials and techniques. The adoption of an urbanisation code that marginalizes the introverted architecture (i.e. a patio house without external facades) in favor of an extroverted architecture is one of reasons. Also, the reconstruction of structures and superstructures with modern materials (concrete, steel and other products...) causes transformations often carried out during the renovation operations that may not directly disturb the original spatial organization the way it affects the structures. The new spatial organization, which takes the form of a new allocation of spaces (bedroom, living room, dining room, etc.) and the adoption of organizational schemes from elsewhere and the superposition of several social practices of space, often generates certain conflicts between forms and functions. Finally, the transformations and redevelopment works that consist of the superimposition of two social practices of space (one traditional and the other 'modern') by a phenomenon of acculturation cause important problems.

These transformations can be explained by the socio-economic and cultural evolution experienced in the whole country of Tunisia. Economic development has led to improved living conditions and a noticeable population growth. The social evolution has been marked by a restructuring of the community's way of life, as a result of the privatisation in economic production. This process ultimately resulted in the transition from the traditional patrilocal dwelling to the so-called 'modern' individual dwelling. The traditional architecture characterized by the fixity of its forms no longer provides sufficient responses to new needs that are emerging in terms of housing.

### **The Deterioration of the Old Urban Fabric**

The orientation of public policies towards industrialization after the country's independence and the creation of a university pole in recent years have provoked a large flow of workers wishing to find employment opportunities in the industrial complex, with the significant number of students attending the university campus. In response to this influx of workers and students, urbanization began to increase with the increase of the urban population and to win over the oasis; there is a significant invasion of the agricultural land by homes of all types causing the modification and degradation of the urban landscape of the medina, despite the ban on construction in the oasis.

Table 1: State of degradation of the old urban tissues (INP, 2004)

<b>State of degradation</b>	<b>Menzel</b>	<b>Jara</b>
Very degraded	10.9%	12.3%
Moderately degraded	29.9%	40.5%
Little degradation	59.2%	47.2%

The table 1 adapted from the work of the National Institute of Heritage (INP) in 2004 shows that these old fabrics represent a disparate case at a very advanced level requiring an urgent intervention that contributes to preserve their specific urban and architectural origins.

The transformations of the old districts and the degradation of the buildings have reached an alarming level. In fact, these homes are also under the effect of the illusory attractiveness of newly created urban centers. Their inability to provide the needs of modern life in terms of equipment, services, infrastructures and means of communication, accelerates the deterioration of these nuclei of ancient civilization.

Oasis dwellings are in a state of general decline and neglect due to the departure of their original inhabitants who cannot or no longer wish to provide them with the necessary maintenance work, because of the break-up of the family and the distribution of property between the inheritors.

In addition, the lack of administrative management by the competent authorities (especially after the revolution of January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011) contributed to the proliferation of these abuses and the disintegration of the urban landscape of the medina of Gabes.

This uncontrollable transformation of the oasis habitation trivializes the traditional urban landscape, deteriorates its original character and depreciates its material and symbolic values (Fig. 7).



Figure 7: Disruption of urban landscapes

(Photo Lassoued, 2015)

#### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Since the UNESCO's adoption of the World Heritage Convention in 1972, a number of experiences have shown the economic value of cultural heritage in the development of many countries. The concept of heritage, which has been extended from the historical monument isolated from its context to the historical site in all its spatial, temporal and socio-cultural dimensions, has today become a decisive tool in development policies. This renewed interest in valuing the cultural wealth of a territory and preserving it against the undesirable effects of modernization poses several problems. Efforts to improve the living conditions of the population through the implementation of infrastructure, equipment and basic services have caused an irreparable damage to the landscape and the environment. Therefore, a problem of adaptation of the new socio-economic needs to the interest of conservation and enhancement of the elements of the past becomes necessary. In the coastal oases of Gabes, which represent vulnerable and very sensitive ecosystems, the implementation of the new urban requirements ravages the important surfaces of these oases and accelerates their degradation and abandonment.

In Gabes, the profound changes that are transforming the territory in the context of 'modern' urbanization particularly embody the problematic issue of the reconciliation between the rehabilitation of the architectural heritage (an aspect of identity and a factor of local development) and the improvement of the living conditions of a population in continuous growth (access to basic services, equipment and infrastructures ...). It is therefore necessary to accelerate the intervention in these territories before they disappear one day.

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