

Caligiuri, Vittorio

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The Development of Tunisian Transport Infrastructures Under the French Protectorate: The Foundations of Economic Dependence (1881-1914)

Vittorio Caligiuri
Roma Tre University

ABSTRACT

The development of the Tunisian transport infrastructure in the period following the establishment of the French Protectorate has been little studied. The history of the Tunisian railways and ports is profoundly influenced by developments in the financial situation of the Regency during the last phase of the International Finance Commission, by the peculiar model of development designed by the "colonial pact" as well as by the strategic design of France in the context of the central Mediterranean region. It was precisely in this period that the dependent structure of Tunisian economy was shaped. The economic extroversion of the country was, in fact, precisely the result of the reconfiguration of the mode of insertion of the country in the international capitalism that took place during the period studied in this article. The Tunisian transport infrastructure was both a result and a determining factor of this reconfiguration exerting its persisting effects during the 20th century. The history of the infrastructure development, moreover, allows us to identify the importance of the debt question in the establishment of French administration, the dynamics and drives that accompanied the extension of the mode of production and of capitalist economy in the context of the Tunisian protectorate, but also the redefinition of its integration modalities into international capitalism and the corresponding thrusts in the metropolitan economy.

Introduction

The development of the Tunisian railway network took place at different times and on the basis of different needs. In this sense,

the setting up of the “network” of all railway lines was not – at least until 1902 – the result of an organic project, but rather the sum of tracks built to meet specific needs, which were added from time to time to previously built tracks. The requirements at the basis of the construction of these lines, although responding to needs of a different nature and scale, can be traced back both to the economic and military dimensions.

As far as the economic dimension of the railway infrastructure is concerned, in general it should be noted that the necessity to transfer the extractive materials from the inland mining sites to the ports on the coast at low prices was decisive. The needs related to mineral exports were linked, in second instance, to those related to the export of agricultural products, which, because of their relative minor importance within the overall exports, influenced the projects of the lines in a limited way, leading mostly to the construction of intermediate loading stations.¹ Agricultural production alone was in fact incapable of generating volumes of traffic sufficient to make the construction of a railway line necessary and convenient. Nevertheless, the construction of railways influenced the dynamics of agricultural property during the period under consideration, and in particular the phenomenon of “legal colonization.”² In any case, although the important influence that infrastructural development exerted on land property structure

¹ Keppen asserts that the function of moving agricultural goods was linked to the fact that the railways that connected the mining sites with the coast crossed agricultural areas. A. Keppen, *L'industrie minière de la Tunisie et son rôle dans l'évolution économique de la Régence*, Chambre syndicale française des mines métalliques - Comité central des houillères de France, Paris, 1914.

² With the start of the phenomenon of “legal colonisation”, French property – especially large properties, as a result of the effects that the proximity of the railway had on land prices – became increasingly important in all the most agriculturally productive areas of the country, benefiting from the sale at favourable terms of state-owned land and, from 1898, of land owned by the Habous Council. By “legal colonization” we mean that complex process which saw on the one hand the realization of an extensive and profound revision of the rules relating to property, modifying the legislation of the Regency in the direction of a definition of the right to property in a direction that was compatible with that of French private personal property, and on the other hand the sale of state property.

from a geographical point of view, it was the improvement of the financial situation of the Tunisian Treasury linked to the export of phosphates in the last years of the 19th century that broke the policy of “colonial austerity” – determining the issuance of public debt explicitly prohibited by article 2 of the la Marsa conventions in order to finance the expansion of the railway network.

In fact, the strong relationship between external financial dynamics and internal developments appears decisive in the evolution of Tunisia’s infrastructure and economic structures, together with the interplay between metropolitan economic and monopolistic interests that constitute the core of classic imperialism³ and the interests of colons and necessities of colonial cycle of accumulation.

In this paper I will use the term “underdevelopment” not on the base of a strictly quantitative consideration, or meaning the retard of a country on a linear “road of development”⁴ but rather in a qualitative and historical perspective. The use of the term underdevelopment in this paper indicates the result of development strategies and trajectories of development in subordinates economies⁵ – as result of both a political and economic influence exerted by the colonial or neocolonial states and capitals, often with the collaboration of national bourgeoisies⁶ – that responds first of all to the interest and necessities of the metropolitan economy, as determined by the evolution in the international regime of capitalist accumulation.⁷ Is thus the entry of a country in a global capitalist economy conceived as a whole⁸ that vastly determine the structure of a national economy from the social and productive point of view.

³ In utilizing this term, reference is made to the characteristics and relationships between colonial and metropolitan economies outlined by Lenin in 1916. With regard to the dynamic evolution of colonial economies in relation to the logic of capitalist accumulation, we refer to the second chapter of E. Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, London, 2001.

⁴ W. Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth: a non-Communist Manifesto*, 1960.

⁵ S. Amin, *L'accumulation à l'échelle mondiale*, 1988.

⁶ A-G. Frank, *America Latina: Sottosviluppo o Rivoluzione*, 1971; A. Abdel-Malek, *La dialettica sociale*, 1974.

⁷ I. Wallerstein, *Comprendere il mondo. Introduzione all'analisi dei sistemi-mondo*, 2010.

⁸ S. Amin, *The Law of Worldwide Value*, 2010.

This close interplay between considerations pertinent to different geographical scales can be easily seen and represented considering the role of the military in shaping the Protectorate infrastructures. In fact, from a military standpoint, the distinction between the networks built on the basis of the Regency government's (and the Protectorate's) need for in-depth control of the Tunisian hinterland – as in the case of the line to al-Qayrawan, initially reduced to military use and later converted to civilian functions, and the Ghraïba-Gabes line – and the strategic needs of the French government, both in the North African context and in the Mediterranean is clearly and easily visible. In this sense, the construction of the branch line connecting Tunis to the Algerian network, built between Djedeïda and Bizerte, well represents the way in which the perception of the strategic importance of Tunisia changed after 1881 on the part of the French apparatus. If from the time of the Algiers expedition, in the eyes of the French diplomacy and strategist, this constituted the – rather permeable – boundary of the new *departement*, after the institution of the Protectorate, Tunisia became, precisely by virtue of the port of Biserta, the ideal point of projection of French military power in the central Mediterranean region.⁹

However, the analysis of the financing solutions and the modalities of management of the infrastructures represent one of the key factors to understand the way in which the colonial relationship between the metropolis and the Regency was articulated. In fact, these are directly affected not only by the particular configuration of the “colonial pact” determined by the legal institution of the Protectorate, but also by the economic modalities through which this was determined, and by the influence exerted by budgetary issues – of

⁹ The definition is used by Saidi, who probably found it in the Report to the President of the French Republic drafted by the Resident General in 1890. H. Saidi, “Le protectorat et le droit. La Régence de Tunis entre la Charte de 1861 et le système colonial français”, in *Insaniyat - Revue Algérienne d'anthropologie et de sciences sociales*, no. 65-66, 2014, pp. 239-257.

the Regency, as well as of the French Government – and of the public debt of the Beylicale Treasury. In this sense, the transition that took place in 1886, with the cessation of the International Financial Commission's functions – determined by the completion of debt consolidation operations by the French state, as provided for by article 2 of the Treaty of Bardo and articles 2 and 3 of the La Marsa Conventions – had a direct impact on infrastructure financing solutions. From 1886 onwards, the Regency Treasury, by virtue of the guarantee offered by France against its debt, had to be able to meet the needs of the Protectorate and of the Beylicale government, without any involvement of the French Treasury – either direct or by way of guarantee – in the investments made on the soil of the Regency, which, by virtue of the peculiar institution of the Protectorate, remained an autonomous, though not independent, state.¹⁰ This is particularly evident when considering the renewed issuances of debt in 1902, 1907 and 1911, preceded by the vote of the French Parliament.

Thus, during the period taken into consideration a redefinition of the role of Beylicate Treasure can be identified. While in the period of the International Finance Commission this mainly ensured the drainage of wealth from taxpayers to international creditors through “granted revenues”, after 1886 the issue of debt service becomes less pressing from the point of view of cash balances, manifesting however to an even more exacerbated degree – by virtue of what was provided for in the conventions of La Marsa – the legal basis for the transfer of budget control from the Commission to the Protectorate and, formally, to the Beylical authorities. Thus 1881 marked the beginning of a new phase of Tunisia's integration in capitalism – as evident when considering the reversal concerning the balance of trade and payments. While in the decades preceding formal colonization it was decisive for Western powers and diplomats to assure the double linking of passive in the balance of payments through manufacturing imports and debt, with the institution of the Protectorate and

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

the stabilization of debt, major importance was to be attributed to the extraction and export of resources to the metropolis – and conversely to import of metropolis industrial products and capitals looking for an investment outlet. Therefore, the Regency Treasure absolved both the function of transferring wealth through continued debt servicing but also financing the development of the colonial accumulation system and the diffusion of capitalist mode of production in the territory of the Protectorate. In this sense the development and financing of the infrastructure played a central role.

Since it's rarely done, it's necessary to mention the dynamic of profound dislocation lived by Tunisian society in the course of the XIX century and particularly in the decades before the French conquest. This is particularly evident when the dynamic of population and of cultivated land is taken into consideration. As noted above, the impact of epidemics and famines had been accompanied by revolts and by the multifarious effects of periodical military expeditions in the hinterland due to the fiscal extraction made necessary by the balance of payments deficit and the growing indebtedness of the regency, coinciding, moreover, with the period of "colonisation of large capitals" favoured by the policies of the International Financial Commission. The drastic fall in population amounted to between 1/3 and 1/4,¹¹ accompanied by a reduction in the extent of cultivated land – only the area under cereal crops fell from 700,000 hectares in 1815 to 120,000 in 1855, while the total cultivated area fell from 150,000 hectares to 60,000 between 1862 and 1969.¹²

As this subject was little studied in the period in question, after 1881, in researching and writing this contribution I relied mainly on primary sources, such as reports to the president of the republic and documents and publications produced by the regency's public

¹¹ Abdel-Jawed Zouari, *European Capitalist Penetration of Tunisia, 1860-1881: A Case Study of the Regency's Debt Crisis and the Establishment of the International Financial Commission*, Ph.D. Thesis, 1998. <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/443/researchworks/handle/1773/10503>.

¹² H. Ayeb, R. Bush, *Food Insecurity and Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa: Agrarian Questions in Egypt and Tunisia*, London and New York, 2019.

works office, as well as secondary sources of the time, such as reviews and publications of organisations often belonging to metropolitan or colonial interest groups. In light of the multifarious implication of some of the subjects mentioned herein and to preserve the unity and simplicity of the text I made extensive use of footnotes.

The development of the Medjerda line and the evolution of concessionary clauses in the first decade of the Protectorate

The railway line from Tunis to the Tunisian hinterland through the Medjerda valley¹³ is at least in its first route, the only railway infrastructure that, at least in one section, dates back to the period before the French invasion. The other important one, – the T.G.M. – cannot be discussed here even because despite its great importance as a vehicle of influence for foreign powers in relation to the Beylicate before 1881,¹⁴ it gradually lost importance during the period of the Protectorate, in view of the work carried out in the port of Tunis that will be discussed below. In 1878, a link was established between

¹³ The north of Tunisia, and in particular the Medjerda valley and the surrounding area, is characterised by climatic conditions described as similar to those in the south of France. The valley formed by the Medjerda river had for centuries been the best route of penetration from the eastern coasts to the Tunisian hinterland and Algerian territory. The conditions, favourable to agriculture and the ease of connection with Tunis had meant that large-scale property ownership was extremely widespread in this territory. Before the establishment of the Protectorate, the large landowners were rentiers residing in the coastal towns, in many cases belonging to allogeneic minorities who had long been resident in Tunisia. F. Vermare, *Notre Protectorat Tunsien, étude historique et géographique*, Poitiers, 1898; M. Dubois, "Introduction géographique à l'étude de la Tunisie", in M. Dubois, G. Boissier, P. Gauckler, Dr Bertholon et al., *La France en Tunisie*, Paris, 1887; H. Sethom, *Pouvoir urbain et paysannerie en Tunisie: qui sème le vent récolte la tempête*, Tunis, 2014.

¹⁴ The complex and very interesting story of the T.G.M. reflects the profound struggle that developed between large and small powers in order to create economic links that would allow the exercise of an increasingly direct and pervasive influence on the Beylicate. I refer therefore to the exhaustive article of L. Debernardi, "Le premier chemin de fer tunisien, le T.G.M. (1870-1898)", in *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, vol. 50, n. 179, 1963, pp. 197-226, and to J. Ganiage, *Les origines du Protectorat français en Tunisie (1861-1881)*, Paris, 1959.

Tunis and Medjez el Bab. This was to be extended to Jendouba and Ghardimaou in 1884 under the Regency's Public Works Directorate. From Ghardimaou, located on the border with Algeria, the Tunisian network was connected to the *Grand Central Algérienne* network, the line connecting Bône – today's Annaba – with Guelma, passing through the town of Constantine.

Plans for the construction of this infrastructure had already been drawn up in 1854, but due to the growing economic difficulties of the Beylicat caused by the increasing importation of non-productive goods during the 1850s and to Tunisia's disastrous involvement in the Crimean War, work did not begin until 1874,¹⁵ the year in which the construction of the work was defined as being "of immediate public utility" due to the need to serve the lead mines located in the north-eastern regions.¹⁶ The attribution of the concession contract to the *Société de Batignolles* clearly shows the progressive affirmation of French interests in the territory of the Regency in the period preceding the establishment of the protectorate¹⁷ and its acceleration after the Congress of Berlin, with the de facto attribution of Tunisia to France.

In 1875, the concession was transferred to the *Compagnie du Chemin de fer de Bône à Guelma*, a subsidiary of the *Société de Batignolles* in North Africa.¹⁸ It was during the negotiations that led to the

¹⁵ Société nationale de chemin de fer tunisiens, *Historique de chemins de fer dans la Tunisie*, <https://www.sncft.com.tn/grandes-lignes/historique/> (last consultation 02/12/2021).

¹⁶ Direction Générale des travaux publics-Régence de Tunis-Protectorat Français, *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

¹⁷ The *Société de Batignolles* was to be one of the companies that played a leading role in the spread of French economic and financial influence abroad; it operated between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century in various countries, including Tsarist Russia. R. Park-Barjot, *La société de construction de Batignolles: des origines à la première guerre mondiale (1846-1914)*, Paris, 2005.

¹⁸ During its period of activity, the *Compagnie du Chemin de fer de Bône à Guelma* also built 443 km of lines in Algeria, but concentrated its operations in Tunisia after the establishment of the Protectorate. It was agreed that if the implementation costs exceeded the branch's available funds, the parent company would finance the shortfall. From 1923, following the company's bankruptcy, the entire Tunisian réseau came under the control of the *Compagnie fermière des chemins de fer tunisiens*. G. Lartigue, *Une expérience ferroviaire en Afrique du Nord, "la Compagnie fermière des chemins de fer tunisiens"*,

formulation of the clauses of the concession contract that the methods of financing public works in the Regency territories used until 1886 were defined. During this period, the concession contracts stipulated that the construction costs of the infrastructures were to be covered by the concession company. Given the financial situation of the Regency and the control of the International Financial Commission over the Treasury, the company's investment of such substantial capital forced the French state – which, since the promulgation of the Beylicale decree of 25 July 1882, had the exclusive right to conclude concessionary contracts¹⁹ – to grant certain guarantees, such as interests on the sums invested, in order to encourage investment. This form of guarantee provided that, if the revenue from the operation of the infrastructure was not sufficient to cover the construction costs, it would be covered by the French coffers, with sufficient interest to also cover part of the operating costs.²⁰

From the mid-1980s onwards – as the French debt consolidation operations were completed and the International Financial Commission ceased its activities – the French Treasury's guarantee role for the companies' investments disappeared; then it was up to the Treasury of the Beylicate to finance and build the infrastructures which on a concession basis the Regency authorities, in agreement with the French state, would put in place once the construction work was completed, using its own budget surpluses.²¹ As the Directorate of Public Works of the Regency itself points out, the items relating to

anciennement Compagnie Bone-Guelma et prolongements, thèse pour le doctorat, Université de Paris, Faculté de droit, 1936.

¹⁹ *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics-Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

²⁰ *Résidence générale de la République française, Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie 1881-1890*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1891; *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics-Régence de Tunis-Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

²¹ G. Lartigue, *Une expérience ferroviaire en Afrique du Nord, "la Compagnie fermière des chemins de fer tunisiens"*, *anciennement Compagnie Bone-Guelma et prolongements*, thèse pour le doctorat, Université de Paris, Faculté de droit, 1936.

the financing of infrastructure works were included in the ordinary budget and not in the extraordinary one, contrary to what happened in the metropolitan territory.²²

This was a transitory solution. The reason why between 1881 and 1885, the French state acted as guarantor of the sums invested by the concessionary companies was the scarcity of the Tunisian state's resources and the control the members of the International Financial Commission had over it. In fact, the Commission – which had managed Tunisian finances before France became guarantor of the debt in 1883 – had acted by withholding part of the Regency's revenue, allocating it to the payment of interests on foreign debt. In 1883, when the "conventions" were signed, the amount of these taxes, called "granted revenue", amounted to some 13 million piasters. The total resources of the Regency amounted to only 22 million piastres, so that the Regency was left with only about 10 million piastres to meet the costs of administration and public services. The International Financial Commission will officially cease to exist with the Beylicale Decree of October 2, 1886, promulgated after the completion of the consolidation of the Tunisian debt, completed in 1884, through the granting of a loan of 142,550,000 francs guaranteed by the French Government, as provided for in article 2 of the Conventions of La Marsa.²³

The Sahel network and the al-Quyrawan ramification

During the last decade of the century, the Cap Bon and Sahel Tunisian regions were linked to Tunis by a railway network – also granted under concession to the *Compagnie des chemins de fer de Bône à Guelma* – which was divided into several branches starting with

²² *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

²³ Résidence générale de la République française *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie 1881-1890*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1890

the main line linking the capital of the Regency with Sousse, one of Tunisia's four major ports.²⁴ The Sahael is one of the most fertile regions in Tunisia. The dynamics that led to the creation of this railway network were intertwined with those of the extension of the Medjerda line. In a letter dated 4 August 1880 – i.e. before the signing of the Treaty of Bardo – the Bey had entrusted the *Compagnie des chemins de fer de Bône à Guelma* with the construction of a railway line between Tunis and Sousse; after the establishment of the Protectorate, the construction of a branch of the Medjerda line was added to this task, which was to connect the station of Djedeida with Bizerte.

However, work was not started as a result of the Treaty of Bardo and the intervening need to redefine the project in agreement with the French Resident Minister,²⁵ and therefore once again with the concessionaire company. Moreover, shortly afterwards, as a result of the Beylicale decree of 25 July 1882 – by which the Regency ceded to the French government the right to grant railway concessions in the territory of the Regency – what had been established by the letter of 2 August 1880 became de facto null and void, due to changes in the legislative framework and because the works had not yet been undertaken.²⁶ In the period between 1882 and 1890, several projects were drawn up and various concession contracts drafted, but these

²⁴ In order of importance, these were Tunis-la Goletta, Sfax, Sousse and Bizerte. These ports were to be profoundly modernised following a general restructuring of the Regency ports in 1885. These works profoundly changed the functions and capacities of each port, directly affecting both the urban structure of the cities and the economic and social dynamics. These works were completed in 1893 for the port of Tunis, 1897 for Sfax, 1895 for Bizerte and 1899 for Sousse. *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900, p. 64.

²⁵ Il Ministro residente vedrà il proprio titolo mutare in quello di Residente Generale con decreto presidenziale il 23 giugno 1885. Résidence générale de la République française *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie 1881-1890*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Nationale, Paris, 1890.

²⁶ G. Lartigues, *Une expérience ferroviaire en Afrique du Nord, "la Compagnie fermière des chemins de fer tunisiens"*, anciennement *Compagnie Bone-Guelma et prolongements*, thèse pour le doctorat, Université de Paris, Faculté de droit, 1936.

were always rejected by the French parliament.²⁷ This impasse was only overcome in 1892, when the realisation of the Sahel network was linked to the construction of the line to Bizerte – which the changed diplomatic conditions, as will be seen, only made possible at that time – with a deadline of 17 February 1894.

In accordance with the policy of financing public works applied following the Regency's debt consolidation operations and the decree of 2 October 1886, the construction of these railway lines was financed by the Tunisian Treasury.²⁸ The operating rights for these lines were entrusted under concession to the *Compagnie des chemins de fer de Bône à Guelma* once the works were completed. For the construction of the Sahelian network, the Tunisian Treasury invested 17,494,097 francs from its own budget surpluses. Of the lines that made up the Sahelian network, only the one linking al-Quyrawan with Sousse had been built before 1892.

The line had in fact been built in 1882 by the French Army Corps of Engineers following the major uprising that had taken place the previous year. As time went by, however, the strategic interest of the line had waned and, as early as 1888, with the reaching of an agreement with the *Compagnie des chemins de fer de Bône à Guelma*, control of the line was transferred from the command of the French occupation division to the Regency, and, with the approval of the French government, the line was converted to commercial and civil service.²⁹

²⁷ Résidence générale de la République française *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie 1881-1890*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1891

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ The Sahel, one of the most productive and populated regions, was the scene of numerous uprisings during the 19th century. This was a consequence of the numerous insurrections of which the region had been one of the main hotbeds during the decades preceding the establishment of the Protectorate, many of which were motivated by the application of particularly oppressive fiscal measures. The relevant peculiarity of the revolt of 1881 was that – unlike the Moroccan revolts – although it was a response to the French conquest, it questioned the power of the Bey, seen, due to the signing of the

The case of Bizerte: the geo-strategic value of Tunisia in the Mediterranean of inter-imperialist rivalries

The city of Bizerte is located at the northwestern tip of Tunisia, on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, approximately 65 kilometers from the capital, Tunis, and about 15 kilometers from Cap Blanc, the northernmost point of Africa. The city is situated on a narrow strip of land, with the Mediterranean Sea in front and the lake bearing the city's name behind it. The lake covers an area of approximately 115 square kilometers and is surrounded by highly fertile hills. From there, Bizerte faces the Sicilian and Sardinian channels, making it a strategically important point for the control of the central Mediterranean.

The territory of Bizerte and its hinterland, like all the northern and coastal areas of Tunisia, are characterized by lush vegetation; historical sources indicate that agricultural yields that could be obtained in this region at the end of XIX century were superior to those of the most fertile regions in Europe.³⁰

However, despite the richness of the hinterland, the movement of goods in the port of Bizerte always remained small³¹ and its importance was mainly linked to strategic and military factors.³²

Treaty of Bardo, as a collaborator of the occupying power. Al-Quyrawan had a particular symbolic value in the region, making it particularly important and sometimes difficult to control: founded in 670 by the Arabs, capital of the Ifriqiya governorate, it houses the oldest mosque in the Maghreb. M.-H. Chérif, "Les mouvements paysans dans la Tunisie du XIX^e siècle", in *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée*, n. 30, 1980, pp. 21-55; K. Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia*, New York, 2013; J.-F. Martin, *Histoire de la Tunisie contemporaine. De Ferry à Bourguiba 1881-1956*, Paris, 2003.

³⁰ C. Riban, *Causeries sur la Tunisie agricole*, Tunis, 1894.

³¹ D-L. Cambourg, *La situation économique de Bizerte et la défense nationale devant le Parlement*, Tonnerre, 1908 ; A. Massé, *Le ports tunisiens*, Paris, 1911.

³² "Mais tout l'intérêt de la ville se tient dans son admirable position géographique et dans son port. Il suffit de jeter les yeux sur une carte de la Méditerranée, pour juger de l'importance de Bizerte. A cheval sur les deux bassins de cette mer intérieure, elle domine à la fois le bassin occidental et le bassin oriental de la Méditerranée; d'un côté les côtes d'Espagne jusqu'à Gibraltar, de l'autre, celles de la Tripolitaine, de l'Égypte et de la Grèce. Placée presque en face Malte et dans des conditions stratégiques au moins égales, elle ne s'en trouve qu'à neuf ou dix heures. Une journée à peine la sépare de la Sicile et de Naples. Elle représente donc en cas de guerre, une base d'opérations mili-

Work began in 1890 on the railway from Djedeida to connect Bizerte to the Medjerda line and then to Tunis. The construction of the line was financed with 5,600,000 francs allocated by the Regency Treasury.³³ Once the work was completed, the line was to be entrusted under concession to the *Compagnie des chemins de fer de Bône à Guelma*, together with the Sahel network, according to the contract signed between the Regency and the company in 1892.³⁴ The port, on the other hand, which had been known for centuries as one of the best on the Barbary coast, underwent extensive and continuous work: in 1886 the port basin was dredged to allow ships with a draught of more than three metres to use it, and in 1888 a study commission of the Regency's Public Works Administration drew up a project whose aim was to extend the port and make it more functional in the light of the important role it was to play in the strategic projects of France. In the same year a commission was also set up, headed by the French navy, composed of members residing in France and members residing in Tunisia – whose roles within the commission were different³⁵ – whose aim was to identify the works necessary for the transformation of Bizerte into a deep-water port. The naval commission identified as necessary works both the construction of a new channel between the inland lake and the sea and the construction of two piers of approximately 300 metres in length to protect the axis of entry into the new channel.³⁶

taires de premier ordre, un poste de combat et d'observation privilégié dans la Méditerranée. Avec Toulon et Bizerte, nous pouvons tenir tête à toutes les autres puissances maritimes continentales". A. Massé, *Le ports tunisiens*, Paris, 1911.

³³ G. Lartigue, *Une expérience ferroviaire en Afrique du Nord, "la Compagnie fermière des chemins de fer tunisiens", anciennement Compagnie Bone-Guelma et prolongements*, thèse pour le doctorat, Université de Paris, Faculté de droit, 1936.

³⁴ *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

³⁵ The former was responsible for drawing up the projects, while the latter limited themselves to evaluating and approving the works proposed by the "French" component of the commission. Espitallier, *Mise au point de la question de l'Ouenza. La défense nationale et Bizerte*, Algiers, 1910; Résidence générale de la République française *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie 1881-1890*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1890.

³⁶ *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux

On 11 November 1889, the concession contract was signed between the Regency's Directorate of Public Works and two contractors, Hersent and Covreux, who were succeeded on 11 May of the following year by the "Company of the Port of Bizerte". The contract – approved by decree on 17 February 1890 – established that, contrary to the practice established since 1886, it would be the concessionary company that would finance and carry out the works,³⁷ which were to be completed, at least as far as the main components were concerned, in five years.

However, most of the capital needed for the work would come from the Regency's coffers, since the anomalies mentioned above were linked to diplomatic factors. In any case, as it had been the case since 1886, the entire cost of the operation would be borne by the Regency, which offered the concessionary company extremely advantageous terms.³⁸ Thus the decision to entrust the execution of the works to a private company – moreover different from the one that managed the other three major ports of the Regency³⁹ – was, in fact,

publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ The Regency government granted a subsidy of 4 million francs to the company involved in the construction of the port, to which a further subsidy was to be added once the work was completed. It delegated to the concessionaires the right to benefit, for the entire duration of the concession contract, from general collection rights and the lighthouse tax, which had been established in 1885, as well as a whole series of local taxes, the maximum amounts of which had been set in the concession contract. The company had the right to use the waters of the nearby Lake Iskeul, both as motive power and for irrigation purposes, if a project for the works was submitted; the exclusive right to build and operate the bonded warehouses; the perpetual ownership of the land acquired for the port works and not needed for port services and a number of other lands. The concessionary company also enjoyed the possibility of benefiting in place of and on behalf of the state from the exclusive right – for the entire duration of the concession – to exploit the two fishing activities on Lake Biserta and Lake Tindja, as well as the possibility of breeding molluscs and sponges in Lake Biserta, without being subject to any internal or export taxation. J. Chaudier, *Le régime douanier de la Tunisie: La loi française du 19 juillet 1890, le décret beylical du 2 mai 1898*, thèse pour le doctorat, Faculté de Droit de Montpellier, Montpellier, 1898. *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

³⁹ Both in the documents referred to above from the Regency's Directorate for Public

determined by diplomatic issues, due to the strategic position of the Tunisian port.

The construction of the new port, virtually capable of modifying the balance of power in the central Mediterranean, required intense work by French diplomacy, which was necessary to reassure and avoid possible negative reactions from England and Italy;⁴⁰ in this sense the decision to entrust the work on the port to a private company was at least partly linked to the need to “mask” the military nature of the projects, giving the construction activities a more “civil” connotation.⁴¹ This necessity led to the decision – in 1891 – not to include Bizerte among the sites where to build the strategic coal deposits needed to supply ships in the event of conflict.⁴² In any case, the construction of the branch line between Djedeida and Bizerte was undertaken as soon as the contract for the construction of the new port was signed in 1890; the rail link directly connected the port of Bizerte with Tunis, where the most important of the strategic coal deposits in the Regency territories was located.

Works and in the reports addressed to the President of the Republic, it is repeatedly mentioned that the decision to hand over the management of the major ports – with the sole exception of Bizerte – to the same concessionary company was determined by the need to achieve greater coordination between the management of the individual ports.

⁴⁰ A. Massé, *Les ports tunisiens*, Paris, 1911.

⁴¹ “Le caractère militaire et métropolitain de ces travaux résulte incontestablement des documents diplomatiques qui prouvent qu’en concédant le port de Bizerte à une Société française, le Gouvernement beylical n’avait en vue que les intérêts du Gouvernement français et particulièrement ceux de la Marine”. Espitallier, *Mise au point de la question de l’Ouenza. La défense nationale et Bizerte*, Algiers, 1910.

⁴² In 1891, the work of a ministerial commission was completed. Its task was to identify sites for storing strategic reserves of coal – a resource Tunisia lacks – whose function would be to supply steamships in the event of conflict. The decision not to include Bizerte among these sites can be explained by the need to avoid further alarming England and Italy at a time when they were proceeding with the modernisation of a port which, although run by a concessionary company – and therefore officially for civil purposes – had an obvious strategic value, and which had already required a certain amount of diplomatic work to get its construction accepted. Only in 1904 did Bizerte appear among the sites with strategic coal deposits, with a nominal reserve of 70,000t, but by 1910 only half of this had been built up, probably due to changing strategic priorities. *Ibidem*.

All the work planned by the naval commission was completed in 1898. The second port of the Protectorate in terms of capital invested – the total cost of the port's upgrading amounted to 10.5 million francs, 6 million of which were allocated by the Regency government and 4.5 million by the concessionary company – that is the port of Bizerte, played a purely military role, while the port of Tunis was the main commercial port, as demonstrated by the volume and value of goods handled there: when in 1899 the goods leaving the ports of the Regency amounted to 310. 000 tons, less than 10,000 tons departed from Bizerte, although the goods entering the port of Bizerte had undergone a sharp increase, rising from about 10,000 in 1897 to about 25,000 tons in 1899, out of 330,000 tons entering all the ports of the Regency.⁴³

The naval station overlooking Lake Bizerte, with its back to the sea, built in the very early years of the 20th century and placed under the direct control of the French navy, was to be the last piece of Tunisian soil abandoned by French troops in 1963. In particular, the geographical position of Bizerte, together with the presence of the large inland basin – surrounded by high hills, equipped with artillery posts, which offered excellent protection to ships at anchor – determined the exceptional strategic value of the position in the eyes of French officers. Unlike the other infrastructures built in the territory of the Regency – which responded to economic needs linked to the model of exploitation of the subject territories and / or the need

⁴³ These figures are taken from the documents of the Regency's Directorate of Public Works; the Report to the President of the Republic for the year 1899 offers slightly higher and non-approximate figures, which nonetheless allow us to understand the relative importance of the Regency's ports in the commercial sphere: out of 331,535t entering all the ports of the Regency, Bizerte was the last of the four major ports with 36,958t; preceded (in ascending order) by: Sousse (40,617t); Sfax (44,284) and Tunis (163,996t). As for the volumes leaving Tunisian ports (305,809t in total), the role of the ports is the same: Bizerte (7731t); Sousse (42,417); Sfax (85,376t); Tunis (110,156t). *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics-Régence de Tunis-Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900; *Résidence générale de la République française Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie 1899*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1900.

for territorial control, internal to the local dimension of the individual colonial territory – the railway link and the port of Bizerte clearly responded to strategic-political needs to be considered within the broader sphere of France's Mediterranean policy. Jules Ferry, the French Prime Minister at the time of the invasion of Tunisia and one of the most prominent exponents of the "colonial party" in the period of the Third Republic, during a session of parliament had said: "Ce lac, à lui seul, vaut la possession de la Tunisie tout entière; oui Messieurs, si j'ai pris la Tunisie, c'est pour avoir Biserte."⁴⁴

Tunis: the city, the new port, the volume of traffic

During the second half of the 19th century, and in particular in the period following the Marsa Conventions, the city of Tunis experienced a period of great change, directly influenced by the changes taking place in the rest of the country and the progressive inclusion of the country in the network of international trade⁴⁵ and the French colonial domains. The city changed its face during the last two decades of the century: the European city, built according to Haussmann's conceptions on reclaimed land on the shores of Lake Tunis, arose alongside the medina. Moreover, it was in this period that the internal migration phenomenon became significant, from the southern and inland areas towards the capital, at the basis of which was the different level of development that historically contrasted inland and coastal regions, but whose determining element was the changes in agriculture, which forced small landowners – who were in competition with large estates using modern techniques, and the

⁴⁴ Espitallier, *Mise au point de la question de l'Ouenza. La défense nationale et Bizerte*, Algiers, 1910.

⁴⁵ Tunis has always been a mercantile city with a strong "Mediterranean" character. During the second half of the 19th century, however, the nature of trade changed, reflecting the hierarchical nature of trade brought about by the effects of the industrial revolution and the growing dependence of the Tunisian economy as well as its integration into the colonial division of labour.

investments they demanded – into a spiral of debt, losing their land in the event of poor harvests, and changes in land ownership. Moreover, the French landlords preferred to use labour of European rather than Tunisian origin,⁴⁶ encouraging the movement of the population from the hinterland to the coastal cities in search of employment. The city was surrounded by often dilapidated suburbs, populated by those who had moved to the capital in search of work.

Under the control of the Protectorate, the Husaynid capital also witnessed an accentuated infrastructural development, determined to a large extent by its being the most important railway junction in the country and by the related construction of the port of Tunis – which replaced the port of la Goletta as the city's port – a project financed with over 16 million Dinars from the Regency's budget.⁴⁷

Tunis is located a short distance from the shores of the Mediterranean, from which it is separated by the lake of Tunis, a basin covering some 6,000 hectares with shallow waters that made navigation possible only for boats without a keel and a shallow draft. Historically, therefore, the role of Tunis harbour had been played by the port of La Goletta, which is only 10 km from the city and faces the Mediterranean Sea, as well as, to a much lesser extent, by the port of la Marsa, located a little further north. In 1872, T.G.M. railway had been built, linking the capital with its ports⁴⁸ and had since been at the centre of a complex game between France, England and Italy as an instrument of economic-political penetration in the period between the establishment of the International Financial Commission and 1881.⁴⁹ With the establishment of the French protectorate, the importance of the line – which, despite its value as a carrier of influence, had always found it difficult to make a profit due to the low

⁴⁶ K. Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2013.

⁴⁷ *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

⁴⁸ L. Debernardi, "Le premier chemin de fer tunisien, le T.G.M. (1870-1898)", in *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, vol. 50, n. 179, 1963.

⁴⁹ J. Ganiage, *Les origines du Protectorat français en Tunisie (1861-1881)*, Paris, 1959.

volume of goods transported⁵⁰ – declined politically and, from 1895 onwards, with the completion of work on the new port, also commercially.⁵¹ In 1905, the steam railway was replaced by an electrically-powered tram,⁵² which was better suited to the new traffic needs.⁵³

As for the port, between 1888 and 1893, the construction of a dock 12 hectares wide was undertaken in what would become the area known as the “marina” of Tunis, on the shores of the lake. The basin would be connected to the sea by a canal – bordered by a narrow-gauge railway line – 6.50 m deep, whose mouth would be located at the La Goletta port, thus cutting almost longitudinally the lake that separated Tunis from the sea.⁵⁴ These works were completed in 1895-1896 with the addition of hangars and warehouses built by the concessionary company of the ports of Tunis, Sfax and Sousse. The construction cost of the port of Tunis – opened for commercial operations on 28 May 1893⁵⁵ – amounted to 16.7 million francs, of which 13.5 million came from the Regency’s coffers and

⁵⁰ L. Debernardi, “Le premier chemin de fer tunisien, le T.G.M. (1870-1898)”, in *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer*, vol. 50, n. 179, 1963.

⁵¹ A.-E. Massé, *Les ports tunisiens*, Paris, 1911.

⁵² T.G.M.’s transition from animal traction to electric traction became possible as a result of the gradual construction of an electricity network in Tunisia, which began in 1899 with the construction of a small power station at La Goletta by CGFT (Compagnie générale française de tramways), a company in which Paribas held a stake. In September 1902, the city of Tunis began to benefit from an electric public lighting system. Finally, in 1905, the construction of a steam-powered turbine plant enabled the electrification of the T.G.M. The electricity company, again owned by Paribas, held the monopoly until the end of the protectorate. Just before the Second World War the Regency was the North African country under French control with the lowest total energy production. According to Saul, it was the country’s late electrification that was one of the determining factors in the country’s poor industrial development during the Protectorate period. S. Saul, *Intérêts économiques français et décolonisation de l’Afrique du Nord (1945-1962)*, Genève, 2016.

⁵³ L. Debernardi, “Le premier chemin de fer tunisien, le T.G.M. (1870-1898)”, in *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer*, vol. 50, n. 179, 1963.

⁵⁴ A.-E. Massé, *Les ports tunisiens*, Paris, 1911.

⁵⁵ The decree opening the new port was published on 10 May of the same year. *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

3.2 million from the concessionary company. In 1905, as part of the infrastructure project of 1902, a new dock was opened for the loading of phosphates from the al-Kāf deposits and arriving in Tunis via the Medjerda line. The mining sites were connected to the line by the Kalaa-es-Selam and Kalaa Djerda branches.⁵⁶

The work carried out for the construction of the port of Tunis is a good illustration of the profound changes in the volume and structure of the Regency's balance of trade, which meant that the existing port facilities, and in particular the port of La Goletta, the main Tunisian port in terms of cargo handling before 1893, were no longer sufficient, due to the increased volume of goods coming from the Tunisian hinterland and destined for export – mainly agricultural raw materials and minerals – and the increased volume of imports. In this respect, it is necessary to take into account the promulgation of the *loi 19 juillet 1890*, by which the French government lowered the customs tariffs for some Tunisian products and cancelled them for others, in order to increase the volume of trade between the metropolis and the protectorate,⁵⁷ which was suffering from competition from Italy,⁵⁸ whose customs tariffs were lower than the French tariffs for the types of goods exported from Tunisia.⁵⁹ The progressive integration of Tunisia within the traffic between the French metropolis and its colonies on the basis of the different structure of production implied by the “colonial pact” thus becomes more evident. It may therefore be useful to analyse some aggregate data in order to understand not only the need that led to the construction of the new port infrastructures – intimately connected with the con-

⁵⁶ A.-E. Massé, *Les ports tunisiens*, Paris, 1911.

⁵⁷ Résidence générale de la République française *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1890*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1890.

⁵⁸ Before the promulgation of this law, exports to the Kingdom of Italy exceeded those to France by about 10%. *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ J. Chaudier, *Le régime douanier de la Tunisie: La loi française du 19 juillet 1890, le décret beylical du 2 mai 1898*, thèse pour le doctorat, Faculté de Droit de Montpellier, Montpellier, 1898.

struction of railways that made it possible to transport products from the hinterland to the coast – the evolution of Tunisia’s economic structure, but also to take into account the effects of the *loi 19 juillet 1890*, in the light of the overall situation of the international markets during the last phase of the economic crisis that began with the general sale of securities in Vienna on 8 May 1873, which gave rise to a widespread although discontinuous phenomenon of deflation in the prices of industrial products, with strong repercussions on the economies of colonised countries due to the strong and continuous fluctuations in the demand for raw materials.⁶⁰

Between 1890 and 1891, the number of commercial vessels that had docked in the 15 Tunisian ports open to international trade – the ports of the Kerkenna islands were open to local trade only – increased from just under 14,000 to almost 22,000; it should be noted that in 1885 the figure was around 10,000 and that there was also an increase in the average tonnage of vessels in transit from the ports of the Regency, as well as a significant increase in the capacity utilisation coefficient of vessels. In 1900 the total tonnage of ships in transit from Tunisian ports was 4.5 million tonnes, of which: 2.4 under the French flag, 1.4 under the Italian flag, 0.3 under the English flag and only 0.1 under the French flag.⁶¹ This increase was a consequence of the net increase in the volume of goods handled (in and out) by Tunisian ports during the period 1885-1899: 115,000t in 1885; 640,000t in 1899.⁶²

As the documents of the Directorate of Public Works do not fail to point out, the growth curve of exports, while showing a clear tendency towards growth, presents numerous fluctuations – largely due to the variables of agricultural yields – while that of imports shows less fluctuation from one year to the next and a continuous and more accentuated tendency towards growth; in any case, it is

⁶⁰ S. Beckert, *L'impero del cotone, una storia globale*, Torino, 2016.

⁶¹ *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics-Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

evident that the volume of imports (300 thousand tons on average) clearly exceeds that of exports (220 thousand tons).⁶³ The increase in the volume of goods in transit through Tunisian ports and the deficit in the trade balance are linked on the one hand to the increase in agricultural exports and, above all, to the expansion of the mining industry and to the role of exporter of raw materials and goods with low added value and importer of mechanical and industrial products⁶⁴ accentuated by Tunisia's position in the network of French colonial trade, leading to the transfer of the country's resources from the Regency to the industrialised countries and, above all, to the metropolis. It should also be stressed that from the end of the 1890s, the growth of exports was less subject to fluctuations following the decrease in the relative importance of agricultural exports on the aggregate figure, due to the accentuated increase, both absolute and relative, of the export of mineral raw materials.

As regards the effects of the *loi 19 juillet* on trade, these are evident: between 1889 and 1890 exports to the metropolis rose from 21,000 tonnes to over 50,000 tonnes, while exports to Italy, already in decline since 1887 (when they amounted to 68,000 tonnes) fell to around 37,000 tonnes, becoming 40,000 in 1891 and 23,000 in 1893, and settling between 15,000 and 20,000 tonnes until 1898. Between 1898 and 1899, there was a sharp increase in Tunisian goods to Italy, which reached 80,000 tonnes, but this should be seen in the context

⁶³ *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

⁶⁴ With the opening up to international trade, Tunisia saw an increase in the importation of goods produced in foreign industrial plants, which were more competitive than those produced by craftsmen and small-scale manufacturers in the territory of the Regency; it was also necessary to import all those goods that could not be produced locally, such as all mechanical and technological products. Between 1885 and 1899, Tunisian imports fluctuated less markedly than exports, due both to fluctuations in production, especially agricultural production, and to demand on the European market, and grew substantially: in 1885 imports amounted to approximately 122,000 t; 210. In 1885, imports amounted to about 122,000 t; 210,000 t in 1889; 185,000 t in 1890, the year that recorded the most significant negative peak during the period under review, after which exports grew steadily until 1897 (over 330,000 t of imports), followed by a partial decrease in 1888 (310,000 t), before returning in 1899 to the levels of two years earlier.

of the general strong growth of global Tunisian exports in the last years of the century. In fact, in spite of very strong fluctuations – with two negative peaks in 1893 (120,000t outbound) and 1896 (167,000t outbound) – global exports rose from 160,000 tons in 1890 to 310,000 in 1899, with two positive peaks in 1891 (245,000t) and 1895.⁶⁵

The southern network: the *Compagnie des phosphates de Gafsa* and the port of Sfax. The development of the Regency mining industry up to the First World War and its consequences

Although it was the northern transport network whose development was most closely linked to the events experienced by the Regency in the second half of the 19th century – to a large extent because the regions linked to it were historically the richest and most important from a political and strategic point of view –, in order to understand the evolution of the economic structure experienced by Tunisia in the period in question and the position the country would occupy in the international division of labour in the contemporary age, another equally important factor is the discovery of phosphate deposits and therefore the development of the southern network and the port of Sfax.⁶⁶ This line, the primary function of which was to connect the extraction plants located around Gafsa with the port of Sfax, had not yet been connected to the rest of the Regency's railway circuit in 1900 and would only be connected in the course of the following decade.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

⁶⁶ The fact that the Regency's Directorate of Public Works was divided into two offices, the first responsible for the "northern" region and the second for the "southern" region, testifies to the reduced importance attached to the southern part of Tunisia; while the former was divided into different offices, each with different responsibilities, the office responsible for the southern region consisted – even in 1890 – of a single engineer based in Sfax. *Résidence générale de la République française, Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie 1881-1889*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1890.

⁶⁷ A. Keppen, *L'industrie minérale de la Tunisie et son rôle dans l'évolution économique de la Régence*, Paris, 1914.

Between the end of the 19th century and the outbreak of the First World War, Tunisia witnessed the development of a flourishing mining industry, which transformed Tunisia, for centuries known as an agricultural country, into an exporter of mineral raw materials. The extraction and handling of minerals led to an increase in the volume of Tunisian exports – in 1914 34% of the value of Tunisian exports was accounted for by sulphates alone⁶⁸ – and, consequently, once again it was the needs related to the handling of mineral products that led to the construction of an infrastructure. Between 1885 and 1886, a French army vet, Thomas, discovered the presence of important phosphate deposits in the Gafsa region and, although the concession contract for their exploitation was only approved by the Bey in August 1898,^{69, 70} the impact on the Protectorate's economy was profound from that moment on.

The company that received the concession to exploit the deposits located in the mountainous massif of the Gafsa region was the *Compagnie des phosphates de Gafsa*, made up entirely of French capital. The company would enjoy exploitation rights for the next 60 years (until 1956) both on the deposits and on a railway line to be built – without any subsidy or guarantee from the government – which would connect the extraction sites with the port of Sfax; the contract also provided for the free transfer to the company of 30,000 hectares of agricultural land owned by the state in the vicinity of Sfax, showing the strong connection between the phenomenon of legal colonisation and infrastructure.⁷¹ The contract also stipulated that the company

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

⁷⁰ From a geological point of view, Tunisia is made up of sedimentary soils, the oldest layers of which date back to the Triassic period. The formations rich in zinc, lead, iron and copper date from the Triassic period, while later periods, such as the Jurassic and Cretaceous, are responsible for the large presence of phosphates, which contribute with elements removed by erosion – if the climatic conditions are favourable – to the great fertility of the soil. A. Keppen, *L'industrie minérale de la Tunisie et son rôle dans l'évolution économique de la Régence*, Paris, 1914.

⁷¹ It was at this time that the French owners were concentrating on the purchase of the

would enjoy exploitation rights for any additional routes⁷² over and above the initially planned 243 km.⁷³ The line would also be open to freight and passenger traffic, although its primary function remained – and still is – that of transporting minerals from the extraction sites to the piers of Sfax.^{74, 75}

so-called ‘saline lands’ – located within a radius of about 30 km from Sfax – which were particularly renowned for the presence of huge expanses covered with olive groves, to which the particular composition of the soil gave particularly high yields. From 1892, when the Beylicale decree of 8 February put the state properties in the area up for sale, transactions increased considerably. A passage in the report submitted to the President of the French Republic on the state of the Protectorate in 1893 shows the conditions of sale, how they were linked to the cultivation of olive trees and, above all, the different availability of capital for European buyers compared to Tunisian buyers. Although the conditions of the sale from which the *Compagnie des phosphates de Gafsa* benefited were peculiar in nature, it is nevertheless extremely interesting to see how the different phenomena intertwine, as shown by the decision to run the railway line through Mahres, and thus, how the growing impetus given to the exploitation of mineral resources in the territories of the regency did not put an end to the many measures taken by the Protectorate to encourage the spread of small and medium-sized French property. Not only is it noticeable how the construction of infrastructures is firstly linked to the needs of the mining industry. It is precisely in this case, together with the sale of state-owned land, which ideally should have favoured settlement by French farmers, that we see how this phenomenon benefits large companies. *Résidence générale de la République française, Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1892*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1893.

⁷² In 1913, the railway reached Nefta via Tozeur, in order to facilitate the logistics of the troops in charge of suppressing revolt actions and to limit the looting carried out by the tribes on the Tunisian-Algerian border, which was always extremely difficult to control.

⁷³ The original route started from Gafsa and followed a substantially straight longitudinal route towards Al-Maharas, a coastal town about 30 km from Sfax, and then northwards towards the port of Sfax. The decision to route the line through Al-Maharas (or Mahres) is probably linked to the particular importance of the area in terms of olive production and to the fact that the town did not have a port until the first half of the 1880s.

⁷⁴ In 1899 – when the volume of ore mined was still only a tiny fraction of what it would be in the following decade and the line had not been in operation for a year – the fleet consisted of 12 locomotives, 17 passenger carriages, including first, second and third class cars, and another 10 cars for ancillary services to passenger transport and the transport of small goods; 12 cargo platform wagons, 2 tank wagons of 10 cubic metres and 2 of 15 cubic metres, and finally 120 wagons for transporting phosphates with a capacity of 20 tonnes each. *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

⁷⁵ As Saul points out, the importance of mineral transport is the first item in the volume

The commitments entered into by the concessionaire company consisted in the payment of a minimum annual fee of 150,000 francs to the Regency coffers, to which a variable fee inversely proportional to the quantity of material exported would be added and the payment of two additional taxes, calculated on the basis of the trend in the sale prices of phosphates and the amount of customs duties.⁷⁶ The city of Sfax was – and still is – the second largest city in the country; between 1886 and 1891, its port was involved in a series of works which, being based on projects approved before the discovery of the phosphate deposits,⁷⁷ were not proportionate to the volume of materials which would need to be handled from 1898 onwards. Indeed, as early as 1891, following the decision to make Sfax the port of embarkation for phosphates,⁷⁸ a preliminary project was approved by a commission appointed by decree of the Resident General. The new project provided for the advancement of the harbour front by about 200 metres through the construction of an artificial peninsula on which the customs offices and warehouses would be built; this work would allow the enlargement of the dock; the quays would be

of freight traffic carried by the Tunisian railways. Between the construction period and 1956, in fact, the transport of minerals will represent between 85 and 90% of the total volume of transport transited on the southern reseau, and between 60 and 70% for the Tunisian railways as a whole, showing how, despite the greater relative importance of the transport of agricultural products on the other lines, the mining sector has played a significant role in determining the construction of railway lines in the Regency territory – as clearly set out in the documents – as well as its importance in ensuring the coverage of operating costs and profits for the concessionary companies. S. Saul, *Intérêts économiques français et décolonisation de l'Afrique du Nord (1945-1962)*, Genève, 2016.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ Between 1886 and 1891, a wharf was built and the dock designed by it was dredged in order to allow ships to dock and useful structures to be built for naval logistics. Since 1881, when the only wooden jetty present had been set on fire, Sfax, the second city of the Regency, had been without any major berth.

⁷⁸ “Bientôt en effet le développement de la ville et de son commerce, l’augmentation très sensible des exportations d’huiles, de céréales, d’alfas, et surtout le choix qui fut fait de Sfax comme port d’embarquement des phosphates qui devaient provenir des gisements de la région de Gafsa, amenèrent le Gouvernement à décider la construction d’un port accessible aux navires calant 6m 50”. *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

equipped with cranes.⁷⁹

Work began in June 1895 and was completed two years later – without any financial contribution from the state – and on 25 April 1897 the new port of Sfax was officially inaugurated.⁸⁰ As in the case of the port of Sfax, the birth of the extractive industry in Tunisia clearly changed the needs that the Protectorate's infrastructures had to meet, radically changing its economic prospects and – together with the various phenomena underway, such as those affecting land legislation and consequently the country's ownership structure – determining profound changes in various territories of the Regency.

In 1914 Tunisia was the world's second largest exporter of phosphates after the United States, with a market that extended not only to Europe but also to the Far East, counting among its buyers Japan, which was engaged in the Meiji renewal. In that year, in fact, the tons of mineral raw materials exported amounted to 1,910,198, for a value of 47,754,940 francs: 31% of the total value of the products exported by the Regency (which amounted to 154,655,189 francs).⁸¹ The sector had undergone a very rapid development, led by phosphates – whose export in 1899 amounted to 63,500t, worth 1,936,000 francs and in 1912 to 1,910,200t, worth 47,755,000 francs⁸² – but not limited to these. The export of iron ore, which began in 1907 with the small quantity of 357 tons, already amounted to 491,758 tons in 1912.⁸³ As already mentioned, the increase in traffic had a very

⁷⁹ The first attempts to award the concession for the port of Sfax were made in 1893, when the commission sent the project, which included both work on the port and the construction of the railway line, to various companies, but they were not interested. The commission then decided to separate the two parts of the project; the concession for the construction of the port was obtained by two private individuals, who almost immediately ceded it to the company that already held the concession for the ports of Tunis and Sousse. *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰ A. Keppen, *L'industrie minérale de la Tunisie et son rôle dans l'évolution économique de la Régence*, Paris, 1914.

⁸¹ *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

⁸² A. Keppen, *L'industrie minérale de la Tunisie et son rôle dans l'évolution économique de la Régence*, Paris, 1914.

⁸³ However, from 1927 onwards, Tunisian phosphate exports were increasingly subject

strong impact on the transport infrastructure of the Regency: enormous facilities for loading ore onto belts were built on the quays of Tunis and Sfax and Sousse; the railways – whose kilometre yields in 1900 were well below expectations⁸⁴ – greatly increased traffic volumes; the Medjerda network, enriched by numerous branches connecting it to mining sites, saw lead and zinc ore replace agricultural products as the main commodity transported to the ports.⁸⁵

The development of the mining industry resulted not only in the construction of numerous centres in the mining areas,⁸⁶ but also in a net increase in the revenue of the Tunisian treasury: whereas in 1901 mining taxes had only yielded 38,220 francs, in 1907 they yielded 186,803 francs. In that year the contribution of royalties on phosphates amounted to 312,661 francs; in 1912, 2,364,508 francs. Treasury receipts from railways also rose sharply, reflecting the increase in goods moved by railways, which was the cause of the increase in these receipts: from about 186,000 francs in 1904, to 4,494,163 francs in 1912, an increase of twenty-four times in eight years. Similarly, the treasury's profits from ports granted under concession rose, again as a result of the increase in traffic, and went from 35,520 francs in 1904 to 966,490 francs in 1912, twenty-eight times more than in 1904. In the period between 1904 and 1912, traffic volumes in the four main ports of the Regency increased almost ten times for the port of Tunis; there was a sevenfold increase for the

to competition from Moroccan phosphates, which were of better quality and therefore required lower production costs. In 1948 Tunisia was the fourth largest world exporter of phosphates – 1.9 million tonnes – behind the United States, Morocco and the USSR. During the first half of the following decade there was widespread depletion of deposits. S. Saul, *Intérêts économiques français et décolonisation de l'Afrique du Nord (1945-1962)*, Genève, 2016.

⁸⁴ *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

⁸⁵ A. Keppen, *L'industrie minérale de la Tunisie et son rôle dans l'évolution économique de la Régence*, Paris, 1914.

⁸⁶ In 1910, 16,569 people were directly employed in the mining industry. Of these, 5,515 were Europeans, employed mainly in administration, as engineers and supervisors, and 11,054 were North Africans, who mostly made up the workforce in subordinate positions. *Ibidem*.

port of Bizerte, an almost fourteen-fold one for the port of Sfax, while traffic in Sousse doubled. The total amount of goods exported from these four ports increased by 1,664,778t during this period. When analysing the traffic volumes of the ports of the Regency in the previous chapter, it was noted that during the first twenty years of the protectorate, the balance of trade was deeply in deficit: in 1912, the sharp increase in exports due to mineral raw materials brought Tunisia to almost parity between the total value of imports (156,294,000 francs) and that of exports (154,655,189 francs).⁸⁷

Let me add a final mention of the elements which, by making prices competitive, favoured the expansion of mining in Tunisia. In his study "*L'industrie minérale de la Tunisie et son rôle dans l'évolution économique de la Régence*," Keppen mentions the legislation – as a result of the subordinate position of the country – favourable both to proper mining exploitation and to exports in general, the geological characteristics of the deposits, which guaranteed low operating costs, the various characteristics of individual mineral sites as well as the general dryness of the climate, which favoured the transport of ore and its initial processing on site; however, a considerable role "in accordance with the needs of modern industry" was also played by the very low price of "indigenous labour."

The Tunisian railways between 1900 and the First World War and the overcoming article 2 of La Marsa conventions: the 1902 and 1907 plans, the 1910 loan

During the first fifteen years of the twentieth century the railways of the Regency of Tunis developed rapidly: if in 1900 the total length of the lines was 927 km,⁸⁸ in 1912 it had reached 1721 km.⁸⁹ The fac-

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁸ *Les travaux publics du protectorat français en Tunisie*, Direction Générale des travaux publics - Régence de Tunis - Protectorat Français, Imprimerie Général, Tunis, 1900.

⁸⁹ A. Keppen, *L'industrie minérale de la Tunisie et son rôle dans l'évolution économique de la Régence*, Paris, 1914.

tors that led to this development were essentially two, largely the result of the strong increase in exports of mining raw materials: the improvement in the financial situation of the Regency – which from 1902 onwards recorded significant budget surpluses, a large part of which between 1902 and 1910 was used in the three infrastructure improvement projects carried out in this period⁹⁰ –, due to tax revenue from the export of phosphates and in general to the improvement in the trade balance, and the need to encourage the growth of exports through the construction of new infrastructure.⁹¹ Here too, the needs of the mining industry (and the pressure exerted by companies on the French government) were decisive. The development of the railway network in the early years of the 20th century took place in three stages: 1902, 1907 and 1910.

On 30 April 1902, the French parliament passed a law allowing the Regency to issue bonds for a total value of 44 million francs.⁹² This sum was to be used exclusively for the construction of the four railway lines already planned by the Regency's Directorate of Public Works. This measure was consistent with the public works financing

⁹⁰ Résidence générale de la République française *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1904*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1905; Résidence générale de la République française *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1907*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1908 ; Résidence générale de la République française *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1910*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1911.

⁹¹ In 1902 Tunisian exports had an aggregate value of 44,929,929 francs, increased over 1901 by 5,814,575 francs. The total volume of trade of the Regency had increased from 77,855,481 francs in 1895 to 117,901,118 francs in 1902. Résidence générale de la République française, *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1902*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1903.

⁹² This law stipulated that the cost of this capital should not exceed 4%, including amortisation. The law made it compulsory for the Regency's annual budget to include the expenses necessary to service the interest and amortise the debt. In accordance with the French law of 30 April, a Beylicale decree was issued on 30 June 1902 creating a type of bond payable to the bearer of 500 francs known as the "1902 loan". The number of 1902 bonds issued was 31,660. Résidence générale de la République française, *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1902*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1903.

policy applied since the second half of the 1980s, which in no way envisaged the use of French public capital,⁹³ relying on resources from the Regency Treasury, whether these were budget surpluses or, more commonly, obtained by recourse to debt guaranteed by the French State under the La Marsa Conventions. One of the main differences in the way in which Tunisian infrastructure was developed between 1902 and 1913 was that the new projects were not drawn up in response to particular needs, as it had been the case during the previous period; at least in intention, they responded for the first time to a design which considered the Tunisian network as a whole, and were based on the forecast of the future needs of exporting companies with the needs of internal traffic.⁹⁴

Another difference was the importance of the project and the financial commitments which its pursuit required from the Regency Treasury. Of the four lines financed by the bonds of the "1902 loan," only one did not have the transport of minerals as its primary function, the one that followed the coast for 130 km from Sousse to Sfax, thus linking the railway line between Gafsa and Sfax to the northern reservoir. The other three consisted of the connection between Bizerte and the mines of Nefza and al-Quayrwan with the mineral deposits of Henchir and Souatir; the largest of these was the one built between Pont du Fahs, south-west of Tunis, and the mining plants of le Kef and Kalaat-es-Senam, on the border with the Algerian region of Tebessa, cutting diagonally across central-northern Tunisia. Despite the 1902 planning attempt, the rapid growth of the mining industry, and especially the opening of new mines – of phosphate and iron – in the mountains on the country's western border, meant that the Tunisian network was inadequate despite recent invest-

⁹³ As we have seen, in the case of the sections of the Medjerda line built after 1881, the French state had to guarantee the payment of a sum to cover the costs of constructing and operating the line to the concessionary company if the income from its exploitation did not reach the necessary sum.

⁹⁴ A. Keppen, *L'industrie minérale de la Tunisie et son rôle dans l'évolution économique de la Régence*, Paris, 1914.

ments, which in any case were not sufficient to carry out all the planned works.

In 1907, in fact, with the approval by the French parliament of the law of 10 January, the Regency was again authorised to issue public debt in the same way as in 1902 and for a total volume of 75 million francs. Of this amount, 12 million were intended to finance the extension of the road network and 5 million to finance measures to encourage the transfer of settlers from the metropolis; the bulk, 58 million francs, was intended for the railways.⁹⁵ Once again, the main impetus for railway investment came from the growing needs of the mining industry, whose rapid expansion and the associated increase in concessions made it necessary, in the same year, to draw up mining legislation. However, the investments planned in 1907 went far beyond the simple construction of new lines and the extension of others (for which 28 million were planned), these in fact included the Tunisian reseau in its entirety, providing for the replacement of rails, the renovation and construction of complementary works as well as the purchase of steam locomotives and other rolling stock (for 30 million). Such was the extent of this plan that the Directorate of Public Works – which, it should be remembered, was to build the infrastructures that would only later be granted in concession – had to double its staff.⁹⁶ The fact that the 1907 project took account of the railway lines in relation to the overall development of the Protectorate's economy is shown by the fact that of the five sections built, only two were of direct interest to the mining industry.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Résidence générale de la République française, *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1907*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1908.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁹⁷ The two lines in question were the one that allowed the exploitation of the deposits of the Nebeur region by connecting the line to Bizerte in Mazerat (the length of the route was 135km) and the one that from the Nefza region allowed the export of zinc, lead and phosphate ores from the port of Tabarka (37km), in the far north-west of Tunisia. Other routes built were the Menzel-Kelibra (55km); Zanghouan – Bou-Ficha (93km); Sfax – Bou-Thadi (60km); Tunis-Teboursouk (90km). A. Keppen, *L'industrie minière de la Tunisie et son rôle dans l'évolution économique de la Régence*, Paris, 1914.

Despite the fact that the sums raised by means of the loans of 1902 and 1907 – the servicing and amortisation costs of which were included among the ordinary expenses of the budget – for the construction of the railways and related works were supplemented each year by capital from budget surpluses,⁹⁸ in 1909 it became clear to the Regency's Directorate of Public Works that not only had not all the works envisaged in the 1902 and 1907 been completed, but also that a significant portion of the Tunisian reservoir was in need of extremely important extraordinary maintenance operations, including the replacement of a significant fraction of the rails.⁹⁹ To this end a commission was formed, which, as in the case of the port of Bizerte and the projects of 1902 and 1907, was composed of members resident in Tunisia and members resident in the metropolis; it identified the actions to be taken, but above all noted the impossibility of resorting to loans whose service costs would have appeared among the ordinary items in the Regency's budget.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ 5,510,000 francs were allocated to the railways, for extraordinary expenditure and/or expenditure not provided for in the 1902 plan. From 1904 onwards, these sums are to be paid into the "railway guarantee fund" established by decree of 30 April 1904. The importance attached to the construction, development and maintenance of the railways in this period is clear not only from the size of the sums invested in relation to the budget, but also from the attention given to it in the reports to the president, not only in the sections devoted to the railways. In 1910, out of a budget surplus of 6,445,744 francs, the sum of 2,245,200 francs, corresponding to the state revenue from the operation of the railways by the concessionary companies for the 1908 operating year, was paid into the guarantee fund. From the reports, it is impossible to determine whether in previous years, too, the portion intended for reinvestment in the railways was equivalent to the amount earned by the state from the concessionary railways; it is not made clear in the reports whether this sum also includes the proceeds of taxes relating to rail transport. Résidence générale de la République française, *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1904*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1905; Résidence générale de la République française, *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1910*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1911

⁹⁹ Keppen states that the situation in 1910 was such that not only were some of the works envisaged in the 1902 plan still to be completed, but that some of the completed works had to be redone in certain places.

¹⁰⁰ Résidence générale de la République française, *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1910*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1911.

It was therefore necessary to resort to different measures than those adopted for the financing of the 1902 and 1907 plans. In 1910, the question of finding the necessary capital to “complete” the Tunisian railway network – the funds from the loans of 1902 and 1907 were estimated to be insufficient and they would run out in the course of July 1911- became urgent; around 38 million francs were needed and the situation brought to the fore the wider problem of the Regency’s financial situation.

Already in 1909 the apparatus of the General Residency and the French government were aware of how the question of financing public works was linked to the budgetary situation and the broader redefinition of the fiscal structures of the Regency, which had already been identified as necessary; this was to be based on an approach defined as “more liberal” in the reports of the Resident General to the President of the Republic, foreseeing the general reduction of direct taxation and a greater use of indirect taxation.¹⁰¹ With the drafting of the budget for 1911, it became clear that it was impossible to use only the budget surplus to finance the completion of the works deemed necessary,¹⁰² as well as to take out a loan whose service

¹⁰¹ The Residency General’s report to the President of the Republic in 1909 pointed out that the three most important financial issues affecting Tunisia at the time were the reform of the Medjba, the tax on the person, and the Achour, the tax on land, the amount of which had until then been calculated independently of the yields of the land, which had contributed greatly to aggravating the situation of small farmers. They often found themselves unable to meet their previous debts and lost ownership of their land as a result of frequent droughts or floods, which were particularly common in the agricultural regions of the country. The general reform envisaged by the Residency aimed to reduce direct taxation, increase indirect taxes and raise inheritance and registration taxes, as well as to achieve greater uniformity with the tax system in force in Algeria. Résidence générale de la République française, *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1909*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1910; H. Sethom, *Pouvoir urbain et paysannerie en Tunisie: qui sème le vent récolte la tempête*, Tunis, 2014.

¹⁰² In this case, it was estimated that 3 million francs from the budget surplus would have to be used each year; and that the Tunisian réseau ferroviaire could not be completed before a decade, with enormous costs for the Tunisian economy in terms of lost earnings, as well as for the Tunisian budget, due to the increased costs of keeping construction sites open for such a long period of time. Résidence générale de la République

would have to be included in the budget under ordinary expenditure, since this solution would have diverted resources from the other services of the Regency, in the context of a general increase in budgeted expenditure, precisely because of the new needs brought about by the tax reforms.

The Commission therefore decided to resort to an *emprunt de liquidation*.¹⁰³ The amount of the loan would have been 90,500,000 francs, with which the costs of urgent and complementary works on the lines already in service would have been covered; the costs for the construction of the Ghraïba-Gabes line, which had been requested by the military authority and was considered indispensable for the control of the south of the Regency, demonstrating that, in addition to economic and political-strategic reasons, the motivations linked to the control of the territory continued to influence the Protectorate's infrastructural policy; the costs for the completion of the Metloui-Tozeur line.¹⁰⁴ The cost of these operations was estimated at 60,850,000 francs. To this sum, we have to add the costs – amounting to 7 million francs – of completing and improving the Medjerda reservoir, operations considered indispensable because of the function of linking Algeria and Tunisia of this line, as well as the costs of constructing the power line between Tunis and Rades and Hamman-Lif and the 18,150,000 francs needed for the construction of the Tunis-Teboursouk line, provided for in the 1907 project but provisionally suspended on the instructions of the Budget Commission in the course of the same year.¹⁰⁵

In drawing up the budget for the 1911 financial year, it was decided that part of the expenditure involved in the loan – 40 million – would be covered by new taxes, which would produce a surplus

française, *Rapport au Président de la République sur la situation de la Tunisie en 1910*, Ministère des affaires étrangères. Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1911

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ This line was important both for military reasons and for the exploitation of mineral resources in the area. Construction work had begun as part of the 1907 project, but had not yet been completed, representing an expensive item in the Regency budget. *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*.

of 1.6 million each year. Since the planned works would affect the lines controlled by the *Compagnie des chemins de fer Bône-Guelma* – it should be remembered that until 1922 this company controlled all the Tunisian routes with the exception of the one between Gafsa and Sfax, which was granted to the *Compagnie des phosphates et des chemins de fer de Gafsa* – and improve their operating capacity, it was necessary to revise the concession conditions, both for the Medjerda reservoir, whose concession contract provided for a guarantee that operating costs and amortisation of construction costs would be covered, and for the other lines, built by the Regency and subsequently entrusted to the company, on the basis of the different criteria adopted after 1884 for the construction of public works. The *Compagnie des chemins de fer Bône-Guelma* therefore agreed to pay the Regency Treasury an annual sum of 420,000 francs until the end of the concession period; this sum was equivalent to the interest and amortisation costs of the portion of the contracted loan invested in the *yieldau* given to the company.¹⁰⁶

Overall, between 1900 and 1912 there was a clear increase in the sums invested in the development of the railway network compared with the previous period. The total amount of loans in 1902, 1907 and 1911 was in fact 205 million francs, 188.5 million of which were used for works directly related to the railways. While in 1902 the railway tracks in the territory of the Regency extended over 927 km, in 1913 they extended over 1721 km. Of the 794km of lines built or financed during the first decade of the 20th century, 635km were built in view of the development of the mining industry and, if we add to this the 305km of lines built by the *Compagnie des phosphates et des chemins de fer de Gafsa* during the last years of the 19th century, one realises that 940 km, and thus some 55% of the entire Tunisian railway network, was built to handle the products of the mining industry, an industry whose output was almost entirely exported to industrialised countries.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ A. Keppen, *L'industrie minière de la Tunisie et son rôle dans l'évolution économique de la Régence*, Paris, 1914.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

Conclusions

A decisive factor in the history of the Tunisian railway system was the relationship between the evolution of the financial situation of the Regency Treasury – and in this sense a fundamental turning point was the completion of debt consolidation operations – and the construction of transport infrastructure. The period from the establishment of the Protectorate to the First World War can be divided into three phases: 1881-1884; 1885-1901; 1902-1911. Each of these phases can be identified on the basis of the way in which the planning and financing of the infrastructures took place, as well as the considerations that contributed to determining them.

The first phase is characterised by the completion of the orders stipulated by the Beylical State before the invasion of 1881, the need for the Protectorate structures to establish their control over the Regency territory and to integrate these into the French colonial domains as a whole. In this phase, a new moment can be traced with regard to the insertion of the Protectorate's economy – already part of what Lenin called "international dependency network" referring to capital export, and whose mature and manifest representation had been the International Financial Commission – into the economic circuit that was headed by the French metropolis, both in terms of economic structures and capital and investment flows. In this sense, the construction of infrastructures corresponds to a phase of gradual diffusion of the capitalist mode of production and of the structures related to "dependent accumulation" within the Regency territories. During this period, marked by the gradual implementation of the provisions of the Conventions of La Marsa, Tunisian finances were still subject to the control of the International Financial Commission. For this reason, in order to ensure that the costs did not burden the Regency's budget – which was under the control of the commission and whose spending possibilities were limited by the "revenues granted" – the concession contract for what was to become the Medjerda line provided that the capital necessary for construction was allocated by the company, capital on the return of which the French Treasury placed its guarantee.

In the course of the second phase, the French demand – which was also the basis for the decision to resort to the institution of the Protectorate – for the Regency to be financially self-sufficient was affirmed. Expenses and investments were to be covered exclusively by the Tunisian Treasury, without any compromise from the French Treasury. A prerequisite for this was the completion of debt consolidation and the dissolution of the International Financial Commission. The infrastructures were built with capital from the Tunisian Treasury and the costs incurred included in the budget of the Regency. Only after completion, the infrastructures were placed under concession. The same procedure was adopted for the major ports, which during this period were the subject of major investments as a necessary complement to the railways; the smaller ports were managed directly by the state. During these first two phases, the construction of infrastructures did not follow an organic plan, but rather responded to separate needs, although they were linked to a general logic and consistent with it. It was during this phase that the process of diffusion of a mechanism of dependent accumulation accelerated, a sign of which were both the *loi 14 juillet 1890*, which marked a new phase of integration of the Protectorate into the French colonial circuit, and the beginning of the legal colonisation – phenomena closely linked to the development of transport infrastructure, and with which only some points of interlinking have been showed.

It was only during the third phase that an attempt was made to plan and rationalise the development of the railway network. The improvement in the financial situation of the Regency, largely due to the rapid increase in exports caused by the development of the mining industry, meant that the 1902 and 1907 projects were financed through loans whose cost was included in the ordinary items of the Regency budget; the 1910 project required a different financial formula. Nevertheless, the period from 1902 to 1911 was characterised by a significant increase in infrastructure investment.

In the course of the discussion it emerged how the need to favour the export of raw materials, responding to the needs of the metropolitan economy, and to meet the economic and structural

needs deriving from the spread of capitalist activities constituted, together with military motivations, the fundamental reason for the infrastructural development experienced by the Regency territories. For this reason, it is necessary to underline the close link between the construction of railway infrastructures and that of ports, and, therefore, the link between the development of transport infrastructures and the rapid increase in the volume of exported raw materials (which corresponded to an equally rapid increase in the importation of manufactured goods) that occurred between 1881 and 1915; in this sense, it is possible to note that although the beginning of this dynamic predates the Treaty of Bardo and the Concessions of La Marsa, it increased rapidly during the period analysed here. At the same time, consideration of the origin of the capital invested and of the concessionary companies makes it possible to highlight the degree of importance of the presence of French oligopolies in the colonial context.

During this period, therefore, Tunisia became part of the international trade network, playing the role of exporter of raw materials and importer of industrial and manufactured goods. It was in this phase that Tunisia's dependence on and exposure to the dynamics of international markets took shape, according to a development formula which, albeit in an earlier period, responds to the characteristics of what Andre Gunder Frank called "underdevelopment development." If during the nineteenth it was mainly the purchase of industrial goods to determine the debt that led to the gradual loss of independence towards the Western powers, culminating with the invasion of 1881, during the contemporary age it would be the structural dependence of the Tunisian economy and of its structure of production, consumption and financing on the "core" capitalist countries and capitals to be decisive in the dynamics of public debt. With this change, that was not only quantitative but also qualitative, the process of construction of the Tunisian infrastructure, and the project and the logic at their base and to which they responded, were both the result and the determining factor.

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