

Alt-Kebili : eine Oase im Süden Tunesiens. Seiwert, Wolf-Dieter.

Kebili is the administrative and market center of the Nefzoua region and located on one of the Tebaga Mountains. It is located before the peninsula between the Chott el Djerid in the east and the Chott el Fedjedg in the West. In the south it is connected to the Eastern section of the Grand Erg Oriental. During the French Protectorate it was called Garrison Town and in 1934 it was exile town of Habib Bouguiba. This place does not have any special sites; at least that is what the Baedeker tourbook says.

When I first drove thru this town 3 years ago in a coach, I was disappointed. I forgot about streets and buildings just after I saw them. Here and there were some grey green eucalyptus trees as always longing to give shade. The wide are of the town seems to stress this July day with all its dust and concrete smelling baking heat. Rarely any tourist treks take a break here. Everyone goes on to the direction of the southwest to the oasis of Douz, Zaafrane, El-Faouar.

The name of the city appears on the gate of the city. But was that really the Kebili that I read about in the old travelogues and where Karl May's Kara Ben Nemsi fell into the arms of Chott el-Jerid after his adventurous ride? No, that was not it. The small and unimportant neighbor town was Souk Baizi, and was made to be the administrative seat by the French at the end of the last century and this little town pretended to be the end of Ben Nemsi's ride.

The real Kebili is located behind the high palm trees, surrounded by a wide and green ring of gardens, away from the big streets. Not being seen by the new administrative masters, the town slowly fell into a "Sleeping Beauty Myth". More and more people from Kebili could not resist the temptation of the new time and they left the city to work for the French. First, they were only the rich families who move to their new houses in Nezla, the the one neighbourhood of the suburb New Kebili. And later, the poor parts of the society followed also. There were people who rented subdivisions, ordinary workers, and beggars. Just one more time the people went back in the protection of the hometown, during WW II when the French community in Nefzoua was invaded by German aircraft. After this time, life again turned its back on Kebili (everyone left). Walls fell down, and so did roofs and mounds of trash were all over the city. In 1947, Kebili was only a "black village" for P. Moreau in his then published work on the Nefzoua.

Due to those circumstances, Kebili remained safe from the town-like de-formation of the original village into a 20th century town. Today it is an example Saharan town culture that is unique in its uniqueness, in the unity and density of its construction in the south of Tunisia. A lot of its original inhabitants are still alive, the traditions and legends are not yet forgotten. All this makes the city to be a book that tells us about a time in which people lived with a close connection to earth and very limited technological possibilities in harmony with their environment. This (agriculture) harmony worked out even though they used their land intensively. The center of this utilization builds the best way to combine the natural conditions and variety of growing food, flexibility of economy and a conscious sticking to sustainability. The geography of the population and the traditions

of Kebili reflect in this way on a history that lasted thousands of years. The region that did not only know wars and conquerors but also a cultural continuity and long periods of peaceful community life together and worthy relations between each other.

March 29, 1992. After a short but intense walk up to a tower we are walking out to the platform of the minaret. For hundreds of years, a muezzin has call on the rich/faithful people of Kebili to come to the prayer. My view flows into the blue wide where the hills of Jebel Tebaga can be seen like waves. In front of the green part of the palmerie there are sand yellow house around the Mosque. Here are there some white parts of zaouia can be seen, a muslim chapel. In the silence awakes a fantasy and your thoughts fly back into the past when there were a lot of voices of merchants and caravan people, the knocking of many workers, and the laughing of playing children. The history of Kebili, or Gebili, as the inhabitants call it, began a long time before the Islam time. In this time, there was a community Ag Belli or Aw Belli that was called this way because of their living community the Bella or Adem Bellum. In Latin sources, the place is called Vebillium, while Adem Bellum had an understandable new meaning through its way of writing "at Temple" for the Romans. "Ad Templom" was the name of a town in the south of Turris Tamalleni near the Tripolitanium Limes. As this is how all the memories of Adem Bellum stopped in the deepness of the past. [The Romans didn't understand Adem Bellum, so they called it Ad Templom, "to the Temple" ... the Romans understood this. So, the name Adem Bellum disappeared].

Only a thousand year later, after the Arabization of Nafzawa, this name gained importance again when the stem of Ulad Bellam took over the area around Kebili. The place that they took in this system was reflected in their geneology. Through that they are connected with the important Confederation of Ulad Mahmud in Tripolitania and through that at least their furthest ancestral line is proved as being Arab. In the beginning of the 16th century, Kebili was only the southern part of the Lawata berber people. The center was the Window Mosque that was built in the 14th century that is still used as a school, up to our century.= Still today, you can feel the atmosphere of the past when hard working students were reading the Quran in the shadow of the garden courtyard and they covered their wooden boards with beautiful calligraphy. When the page was full, and the unit was learned, they went to a flat sink to wash the ink to make space for the next paragraph. This is how they learned to read, to write ... punctuation, grammar and much more.

In the 16th century, the Ulad Bellum settled down at the North End of the Lawata Community and so inhabited the upper part of Kebili. Even though the communities of both parts of town mixed at a later time, people still differentiate between old Kebili and the jiha loga (Lawata side) and the upper side (jiha foga) today. Between these 2 sides there is the central market (rahba) where still in the 1st half of our century, there are plenty of shoppes and public buildings. On the north side there is also the house of Abdallah al-Mahmudi, under whose leadership the Ulad Bellum settled in Kebili and to whom a lot of pale skinned Arabic people from Kebili refer to. The town was surrounded by a wall that had 5 bib gates. Only the main gate Baba r-rahba was wide enough that wagons could pass thru it. The opening and closing of this gate was only

done by a special family designated to do this, and, it was closed and opened according to very strict rules. Each of the 4 entrances was watched by a Marabout, whose chapel was near the gate. The zouia at the same time were the center of a religious brotherhood that referred back to the marabout. The only one that recently plays an active role in Kebili is the tariqa issawiya. You do not only see it during the Date Festival in Kebili, but also during the Sahara Festival in Douz, and in ceremonies on religious holidays, in the long nights of Ramadan, and a lot more. One of the marabouts himself had a great impact on the town, Sidi Ali Badr ad Din at-Tebisi. The rest of his body is set in a chapel named after him (p.29). His descendants still live in Kebili.

The center of the upper town of old Kebili is the Mosque built in 1540. In its courtyard begins an underground path, that in former times went to the Turrus Tamalleni, the ancient center of Nefzoua. There is no entrance now. The Mosque is still visited every Friday as well as for religious holidays by the people of Kebili.

Let us go to our companions Si M'hamed and Si Nabil on a walk through the town. It is spring. The desert is in bloom. The birds that returned from their African winter quarters relax once again in Nefzoua before they cross the Chott El Jerid non-stop. The thermometer shows more than 30 degrees in the shade at noon time. In contrast to the low pressure of the European spring, here hard storms make the land suffer. The air has been filled with sand for days that make dunes wander into your room. It is more comfortable in Old Kebili, the ring of palms breaks the power of the wind. We are walking from the central market place in the direction of the Bab al Budi. Plain and window-less walls cover the streets. Behind them there are big courtyards where related families live. The room group on 2 floors around the central courtyard. The entrance is called sqifa, like a pre-courtyard that separates the private area from the outer world. This is where the kids play, where you meet visitors. Let's look again into the inner courtyard that is called husch. On the ground floor we see kitchens and stables/stalls, but also some bedrooms (sabat). A lot of rooms have multifunction characteristics. They can be used for sleeping and storage at the same time, they can host baby animals in the winter or can be kitchens, and also use for kids to play and sleep. Through thick chairs on the outside of the building, you get to a courtyard to the living and sleeping portions of the upper floor (ghurfa). Here is also the dar (family), the living room of the family. In most rooms I see pottery in different sizes, some of them as high as a person. They are called khabiyas, and they are pots to save dates. All of them have a little sealed opening on the bottom, and the date syrup collects at the bottom ... then they take it out. Families have 2-3 of the pots according to their wealth.

Each family ('arch) lived in one part of the city that was called after the family: Dar Gwasma, Dar Swayifa, Dar Khwaldiya, Dar Azzaba, et al. In some parts the roads had different names. They were called portals (burtal) that were named after the family that lived in the upper part. Burtal ... (2nd column p. 30). One of those portals is still in use. Its way of construction shows how close the architecture was to the extreme living conditions in this region. The floor/basement above the road is not connected to the house on the other side of the road, but is constructed on stony columns. In this way there was a distance between the houses that functioned as a fireplace where the hot air

could escape. And this is how there was a nice climate in the streets even though the sun was giving great heat. So no surprise it was a very popular place for men to stay when they wanted to relax after a hard working day in their garden or after an exhausted caravan trip.

From time to time we see some big stones. Some of them are covered with painted vines or other art. They are obviously from a pre-Islamic time and were brought from a ruin field in the neighbourhood. When building, people usually used pragmatic structures everything that was nearby was used to build the house. But most important were stones, sediments, and palm materials. They use the wood of the palm trees to make big and complicated systems to close their doors and they used the rest of the palm tree to build the roof of the house and the ceilings of the rooms.

Near the Bab al-Budi we go into one of the last farms/big buildings were people still live now: Dar Rwin. The Rwin family was specialized in construction work. Perhaps that is the reason why they still live in this ruined place. Nevertheless, the old siblings who meet us there do not have the intention to leave their father's house. Petroleum lamps and a river canal nearby are still today their sources of energy and water. But, the connection to the old Kebili to the energy is set yet. Since 1991, the Mosque and the nearby courtyard are connected to energy. The continuation of the electricity up to the few houses that are not yet connected to energy is just a question of time and money. With patience, our host is holding his prayer necklace and the beads in his hand, while his sister is taking care of the goats. Both of them are way older than 70, and they are not very wealthy. And still they have something that could not be weighed with gold, what they have for the future of the town [they are valuable because they are the last ones to live in this culture]. They have the knowledge of traditional technology and experiences of a long working life.

Also in other families some working professions [handy work] were given from generation to generation. This is how the house Dar Abd al Ali gained proficiency and wealth in woodworking, experience and proficiency. The Dar aunallah were very handy in doing pottery, especially ovens, water pitchers, and what is said before, the pots for dates (khabiya), the Dar Dhwibi made hats, bas, and baskets out of palm leaves. The Bu Abdallah bei Menchia family that came from Haddada were famous ferrier.

In the other city there lived two families who worked as musicians and never missed a festival in Kebili. A drummer of the Dar Tabal and the Oboe player of the Dar Maschhur. The family name of the last one Maschhur means famous, goes back to the fact that they had very violent troubles [between the men] with their playing that led to big fights between the men.

Famous for the social structure of the oasis it is that the musicians and well as the craftsmen were introduced to us as non Arabic and "black". With the Dar Rwin, it seemed to mean that they were obviously part of an old Saharan mixed population.

Through Kebili there was a trans-Saharan trade route before the French protectorate. This is how Ghadims and Ghat were connected to Kebili for a few hundred years with central Africa and the Sahel. Up to the prohibition of slavery in the year 1846, Kebili was a famous place for slave trade and this is how you can tell the high percentage of black-skinned Tunisians in the city. The light-skinned people from Kebili tend to call all black-skinned families as descendants of former slaves. Which is possibly not true according to the age and the location of Kebili. Such family names as FlaFla (Fulbe) or Bangui also seem to speak against the slave theory. Nevertheless, the non-Arabic families in the traditional community of the oasis were less popular than the white members of the community. Most of them were economically dependent, and had to work hard.

The mayor or sheikh of the town was always a descendent from a rich Arabic family, the Mhamid. Up to the beginning of the French protectorate, he was announced by the kahiya, that is the governor of the Nafzoua/the governor of the Beys of Tunis. The last kahiya was part of the family of B'el-Hmadi (Dar Gwamsa) a group of the Mnasira. As a living and working place, Dar Hmadi, he chose a little hill away from the city and away from the palm ring, where he settled with his family. If you want to visit the rest of the governor's palace, Burj Kahiya, today, you first have to get over a very high dune that covered the big halls, accommodations for the soldiers, the jail and the business room, with wind over many years. And this is how it was saved for our world while the upper part of the building was not protected from the sand, and it is rotten now.

On the foot of the mountain, a working group built an iron tower. This tower goes down deeper and deeper to search for water, 10, 100, 1,000 meters? The artesian well Ras el Ain, it is receded now after it gave life in the oasis for hundreds of years. In his part fossilized water with a temperature of 60 degrees comes up (hot springs) and gets together in the 2 pools between the Fort Autrauche and the street to Douz to flow from there on through the palm gardens to old Kebili. The water pools are the public pools of Kebili that the people are very strict with the separation of the gender, men can only use the pool if they enter from the street whereas women tend to use the part that is further away and that is hidden from the view of nosy tourists.

New year's eve 1993. Together with our friend Sidi M'hamed we followed the little river to Old Kebili. The warm sun, the silence of the oasis, and the fresh green of the gardens arose our feelings of spring. Men were lying near the warm water of the little river. The people here and there in the gardens, the people here and there in the gardens didn't seem to be stressed. A lot of them work to collect the dates. Men sit on top of the palms and cut off the heavy fruits and try to bring them as, with a lot of attention, very slowly on a rope to the earth. Basically, only one type of dates is exported to Europe, deglet nur. Most of them you can only try here. For example, the type, fimi, that most people really like in Kebili.

Because of its idyllic location, Old Kebili was being closely looked at from a foreign hotel enterprise (from Saudi Arabia). An official deal was made very soon, but when the bulldozers knocked down the first houses, there was a large outcry/protest from the city. The families that had lived there for a long time saw not only their wealth, but also

their past and their identity in great trouble, they were afraid of that. They stood up, they protested, and they wrote one official letter after another, and in the end, the hotel project was stopped. Being conscious of what happened, a dozen of important men of different ages sat together to work on the “Association of Protection of Old Kebili” according to what their fathers would have wanted for old Kebili, for the town and the reconstruction of old Kebili. The cleared part of the town remains to be a symbol and reminder for the power of the unity of the community and is today used as the place for the annual Date Festival that takes place since 1991, annually in November.

Note:

This text goes back the information of Mr. Mhamed Souf, Nabil and Ahmed from Kebili, who I want to thank here. The orientation plan was set up according to drawings that were made in 1991 by an Italian team under the operation Lycee mixte de Kebili.