



Agriculture and Farming in the Regency of Tunis during the Ottoman Era (1574 - 1881 AD)

An In-depth Historical and Economic Study of Land Structure, Production Techniques, the Fiscal System, and Their Social Impact

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Abstract

This extensive historical, economic, and structural research investigates the realities of the agricultural sector in the Regency of Tunis throughout the Ottoman era, spanning from the final conquest in 1574 AD until the establishment of the French protectorate in 1881 AD. The study aims to dismantle the complex network of relationships connecting land regimes, property legislation, and the fiscal and financial policies of the Makhzen (the state). Furthermore, it highlights production mechanisms and the geographical distribution of crops across the country's four major regions (the North, the Sahel, the Cap Bon, and the South). The research articulates in depth the unprecedented technological and engineering impact of the Andalusian (Morisco) migrations, which re-engineered the rural and hydrological landscape. Finally, the study provides a precise socio-economic analysis of the catastrophic repercussions of escalating tax pressures (such as the Majba and Lazma taxes) coupled with cyclical natural and demographic crises, demonstrating how these combined factors ultimately led to the exhaustion of the Tunisian countryside and paved the structural and land tenure path for the imposition of French colonization.

Introduction

Since its integration under Ottoman sovereignty in 1574 AD, following the expulsion of Spanish forces by the military commander Sinan Pasha, the Regency of Tunis underwent profound structural transformations that affected its political, social, and economic foundations (1). With the erosion of the direct centralized authority of the Sublime Porte and the evolution of the local governance system through the stages of the 'Deys' then the 'Muradids,' culminating in the establishment of the autonomous 'Husainid' state in 1705 AD by Husain ibn Ali, agriculture emerged as the primary existential, economic, and cultural pillar of the Tunisian country (2). Agriculture in this era was not merely an isolated subsistence activity practiced by rural populations; rather, it was the central engine of the entire economic cycle, the primary source of funding for the state's military and administrative apparatus, and the main commercial conduit with the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea (3).

The importance of this study lies in restoring due weight to the economic and social history of the Regency of Tunis, moving away from traditional political narratives centered around the capital



and the Beys' palaces. The Tunisian countryside was the true producer of wealth and the safety valve of stability. Understanding the structural mechanisms that governed rural areas allows for dismantling the deep fabric of society and tracking the causes of the structural weakness that afflicted the country in the nineteenth century, ultimately leading to the loss of national sovereignty. Moreover, its intellectual and legal significance highlights the land laws and the overlap of written Islamic jurisprudence with inherited tribal customs in organizing and exploiting vital resources like land and water (4).

This rigorous study seeks to achieve a set of strategic academic objectives: first, to classify the land regimes prevailing in the Ottoman era and explain their direct impact on the farmer's incentive to produce, develop, and reclaim land. Second, to map an accurate agricultural landscape illustrating crop geography and regional specialization in grain, oil, and date production. Third, to trace the technological and engineering impact of the Andalusian (Morisco) migration on modernizing the irrigated agricultural sector. Finally, to analyze the fiscal system and monitor the catastrophic repercussions of unjust makhzen taxes that sparked sweeping rural revolutions and led to the abandonment of agricultural land (5).

• **Scope of the Study:**

- Temporal Boundaries: Extends from the final Ottoman conquest of Tunis in 1574 AD to 1881 AD, the date of the establishment of the French protectorate, representing the crystallization of the Regency's legal, economic, and political identity.

- Spatial Boundaries: Covers the complete geographical domain of the Regency of Tunis across its four regions: the North (the Medjerda basin and El Fejrej), the Sahel and Sfax, the Cap Bon and Bizerte, and the South and its oases (Bled El Jérid and Gabès).

- Thematic Boundaries: Limited to agricultural and livestock activity, and related land regimes, makhzen taxation, irrigation techniques, export trade, and monopolistic policies (6).

• **Research Methodology:**

The study relies on the comparative analytical historical method, scrutinizing official documents and tax registers preserved in the National Archives of Tunisia (the registers of Dar El Bey and Finance), and comparing them with accounts by contemporary historians and European travelers. It also employs a socio-economic approach to link fiscal data with social transformations and demographic phenomena such as flight, rural abandonment, and the emergence of feudal production relations (7).

• **Research Problematic and Sub-questions:**

The central problematic revolves around the following question: How did the interaction between land regimes and the fiscal policies of the Tunisian Makhzen shape the agricultural landscape throughout the Ottoman era? Was the collapse of this sector on the eve of colonization a product of natural droughts or the injustice of the ruling state? From this core issue, several sub-questions emerge:

- What was the legal nature of Beylik and Habous lands, and how did they affect peasant stability?



- What technical and engineering role did the Moriscos play in transferring agricultural practices from Andalusia to Tunisia?

- How did nineteenth-century fiscal policy (the Majba tax model) spark rural societal explosion and destabilize production? (8).

Main Body of the Article

• Land Regimes and Property Legislation of Agricultural Lands:

- State Lands and Public Property:

+ Beylik (Emirial) Lands, Geographical Extension, and Makhzen Confiscations: Beylik lands (or emirial lands) served as the fundamental financial, political, and military guarantee for the ruling Ottoman authority in Tunis (9). These were lands whose absolute legal ownership reverted to the Muslim public treasury (Bayt al-Mal) after the collapse of Hafsid rule and the expulsion of the Spaniards, as the Ottoman state considered itself the legitimate heir to all previous sovereign estates and properties of past conquerors (10). These properties expanded systematically through 'political makhzen confiscations'; whenever a rural tribe staged a fiscal rebellion or a notable, military commander, or fallen minister opposed the state, the Bey immediately ordered the confiscation of their fertile lands, annexing them to the Beylik domains to strengthen state centralization (11). These lands were strategically concentrated in the highly fertile and rain-abundant northern plains, such as the vast basins of the Medjerda River, and the plains of Mateur, Blat, Béja, El Fejrej, Siliana, and Le Kef (12). These plains represented the major production fields (Henchir) upon which the Makhzen relied to secure food supplies for the Janissary army (Oujak) and supply the urban populations of Tunis and Bizerte. The management of these lands was handled by specialized makhzen bureaus that monitored plowing seasons and recorded areas in tax registers with meticulous accuracy to prevent agent fraud (13).

+ Mechanisms of Exploitation of Beylik Lands (The Affermage System and Unjust Khamessat Contracts): Given the inability of the Makhzen's administrative and bureaucratic apparatus to exercise direct, on-site supervision over these vast spaces, the Beys relied on two main systems to exploit Beylik lands and ensure capital flow into the treasury. The first was the Tadhmin (Affermage/Iltizam) system, a capitalist land-leasing arrangement where the Bey granted land exploitation rights for specified periods to urban notables, prominent merchants (especially Grana Jews or Andalusian Muslims), or favored military commanders in exchange for a large, upfront lump-sum payment to the High Treasury (14). The contractor held absolute rights to manage the land and extract profits by any means available, including coercive ones. The second, and socially most widespread mechanism in the Tunisian countryside, was traditional sharecropping (Khamessat) contracts (15). Here, the impoverished local peasant (Khammes) plowed, planted, and tended the land using capital, seeds, and draft animals provided by the landowner (the Beylik or contractor) (16). At the end of the grueling harvest and threshing season, and after deducting seed expenses and heavy makhzen taxes, the Khammes received only one-fifth of the actual crop (20%) as wages for a full year of labor. This meager share kept rural Tunisian society in permanent



destitution and under cumulative debt burdens, preventing economic emancipation or tool development, tying them to the land in feudal arrangements akin to disguised slavery (17).

- Habous Lands, Private Property, and Communal Lands:

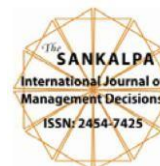
+ Habous Lands (Public and Family Waqfs) as an Economic Refuge for Asset Protection: Waqfs or Habous represented a highly significant land and economic phenomenon in Ottoman Tunisia, occupying up to one-third of the agricultural lands and olive groves in some periods (18). Strict Maliki and Hanafi jurisprudential codes protected them from the Beys' confiscations, as it is legally prohibited to sell, mortgage, or confiscate dedicated waqf property. Structurally, they were split into two types: Public (Charitable) Habous, which were properties endowed by sultans, deys, and notables whose financial returns directly funded religious, educational, and social institutions such as the Zitouna Mosque-University, traditional hospitals (Maristans), Hanafi and Maliki schools, and socially active Sufi lodges (19). The second type was Family (Lignage or Private) Habous, where large landowners, merchants, and even ministers endowed lands to their male and female descendants (20). This legal and religious stratagem was a clever and widely practiced means in Tunisia to protect private property from 'makhzen confiscation' used arbitrarily by Beys during financial or political crises, and it prevented the fragmentation of large estates across generations, keeping wealth within the family unit (21).

+ Private Property (Melk) and Arch Lands (Tribal Communes) in the Center and South: Private property (Melk) lands were subject to full and absolute ownership rules (both bare ownership and usufruct) by individuals. Owners had complete freedom to dispose of their property via sale, mortgage, gift, or inheritance without state intervention, provided they paid the corresponding religious taxes (22). This pattern thrived in regions with long-standing, dense human settlement, such as the towns and villages of the Tunisian Sahel (Sousse, Monastir, Mahdia, Sfax) rich with inherited olive groves, and in the Cap Bon peninsula (Dakhla) famous for orchards, fruit trees, and vineyards (23). On the other hand, communal and tribal lands (known in Tunisian historical literature as Arch lands) covered immense areas in the central and southern regions (the high and low steppes and the semi-desert zone) (24). Land ownership here did not belong to a specific individual but was a collective, undivided property of the tribe or 'Arch' as a whole, managed by councils of elders (Mî'âd). Usage rights were determined by actual occupation and temporary possession during rain-fed plowing and planting seasons (Mçarîh), alongside the main function of collective grazing for sheep and camel herds (25). This arrangement posed a continuous challenge to the central authority, which struggled to census tribal assets for tax collection, keeping relations between the Makhzen and Arch tribes in a constant state of friction and confrontation (26).

• The Agricultural Landscape and the Distribution of Crops and Production:

- Plant and Tree Production Regions and Abundance Equations:

+ The Northern Region and the Medjerda Valley (Granaries of Grain and Storage Methods in Matamores): The northern region of Tunisia, particularly the Medjerda River basin, was the beating heart of the Regency's agricultural economy, a historical continuation of what was known during the Roman era as the 'Granary of Rome' due to high rainfall and rich alluvial soil (27).



Agricultural production here focused almost entirely on strategic cereal crops, foremost among them durum wheat (locally known as the 'Mahmoudi' variety, famed for high quality and long-term storage capacity). This was supplemented by barley, the staple food for draft animals and large segments of the popular and nomadic classes, alongside major legumes like fava beans, chickpeas, and lentils (28). Given the sharp climate fluctuations between rain-abundant years and periods of harsh drought, northern farmers developed an ingenious underground storage technique known as 'Matamores' (29). These were deep, expanded pits dug into dry clay soil on elevated terrain to prevent groundwater seepage, lined with straw and burnt clay. When filled with grain, their openings were hermetically sealed and covered with soil. This allowed Tunisiens to preserve food security stocks of wheat and barley for several years without moisture infiltration or pest spoilage, providing a vital safety valve against cyclical famines (30).

+ The Sahel and Sfax Region (The Vibrant Kingdom of Olives and Processing Industries): The Sahel region and the coastal strip of Sfax extend from the Gulf of Hammamet in the north to the borders of the Gulf of Gabès in the south. Although classified as semi-arid, its proximity to the Mediterranean Sea provides very high atmospheric humidity that compensates for rainfall deficits, creating the ideal climate for the blessed olive tree (31). The Ottoman era, especially the Husainid period in the eighteenth century, witnessed extensive planting campaigns of olive groves urged and encouraged directly by Beys, who saw oil as an inexhaustible tax and export resource (32). The Sahel and Sfax became a true 'kingdom of olives,' where properties were typically small or medium-sized and run by direct family labor, establishing a deep emotional and economic bond between farmers and their land (33). Economic activity went far beyond harvesting and pressing olives in traditional mills; strong processing industries flourished in Sousse, Monastir, Mahdia, and Sfax, most notably premium soap making and candle manufacturing (34). Tunisian olive oil became the primary export of the Regency and the center of fierce commercial competition among French, Italian, and English trade companies and agencies operating in Tunisian ports (35).

- Irrigated Regions and the Micro-Economy of Oasis Management:

+ The Cap Bon and Bizerte Region (Intensive Orchard Farming and Animal Husbandry): The Cap Bon region (Sharîk peninsula) and the coastal Bizerte region benefited from their strategic geographical locations, moderate damp climates, and abundant shallow water tables that allowed easy well digging (36). This region specialized in 'intensive irrigated farming' and enclosed orchards (Souani), focusing production on various fruit trees like figs, almonds, and pomegranates, alongside vegetables, sugar cane, and vineyards for raisins and wine (37). The region was distinguished by its proximity to the Tunis capital market, allowing farmers to market fresh produce daily at profitable prices. This plant cultivation was accompanied by a remarkable development in intensive 'animal husbandry,' particularly cattle, sheep, and dairy goats, regularly supplying major towns and cities with dairy products, traditional cheeses, and fresh meat, fostering clear economic wealth and social stability (38).

+ The Southern Region and Oases (Bled El Jérid and Ibn Chabbat's Water Distribution System): The southern region of Tunisia, particularly the Bled El Jérid area (Tozeur, Nefta, Degache) and



coastal Gabès, represents a harsh desert environment where rainfall is non-existent, making agricultural life and human presence entirely dependent on natural artesian springs (39). In this challenging setting, the date palm was the absolute pillar of sedentary, economic, and social life. The oases of Jérid were world-famous across the Islamic world for producing and exporting the finest dates, led by the 'Deglet Nour' variety, known for its translucent honey color and long-distance transport durability (40). To ensure these oases remained productive and to avert deadly clan conflicts over water, residents of Jérid relied on an engineering and mathematical system inherited from the medieval Tunisian scholar and jurist 'Ibn Chabbat' to divide spring waters with extreme precision (41). This system distributed water through main and secondary channels called 'Seguias,' calculating each farmer's share by time using traditional water clocks (Gaddous). This strict arrangement optimized scarce water resources to sustain multi-layered, intensive farming under palm canopies, including mid-sized fruit trees, vegetables, and fodder, turning the oasis into an integrated ecosystem that defied desert aridity (42).

• **The Andalusian (Morisco) Contribution to Agricultural and Irrigation Development:**

- **Technology Transfer and Rural Space Re-engineering:**

+ Advanced Irrigation Engineering and Mawajel Cisters: The beginning of the seventeenth century, specifically the year 1609 AD, witnessed a momentous event that altered the face of the agrarian economy in the Regency of Tunis: the influx of thousands of Morisco families forcibly expelled from Spain under the decree of King Philip III (43). The Regency of Tunis, under the rule of 'Othman Dey,' welcomed these migrants warmly, settling them in strategic areas in the north and Cap Bon, including the towns of Testour, Soliman, Zaghouan, Medjez El Bab, Raf Raf, and Kalaat El Andalous (44). The Andalusians brought an advanced technical and scientific heritage that sparked a genuine agricultural revolution, introducing advanced irrigation technologies like massive waterwheels (Norias) driven by river currents to lift water to higher elevations, the 'Nadhoulj' system, covered brick-built water channels to prevent evaporation, and the building of large cisterns (Mawajel) to collect rainwater for summer use (45).

+ Diversification and Intensification of Tree Plantings: Thanks to their high skills, lands surrounding Andalusian settlements turned into lush green paradises. The Moriscos focused on cultivating fruit trees whose grafts they brought from the Iberian Peninsula (46). The city of Testour became famous for its renowned Andalusian pomegranate, alongside intensive plantings of figs, almonds, oranges, and lemons. They also introduced new varieties of vegetables and sugar cane that were uncommon in the Regency, which helped diversify the food basket and maximize the economic yield of reclaimed lands (47).

- **The Emergence of Agro-Industrial Processing:**

+ Sericulture and Natural Silk Production: The Andalusian contribution was not limited to food production; they established an integrated agro-industrial system (48). They expanded the cultivation of 'white mulberry' trees, using their leaves to rear silkworms for natural silk production. This drove a boom in silk textiles and luxury traditional apparel in the cities of Le Kef



and Tunis, marking a qualitative leap by linking agricultural production with urban craft activities (49).

+ Dye Plant Cultivation and the Chéchia Manufacture: The Andalusians expanded the cultivation of the 'safflower' plant, whose flowers served as a primary dye material for coloring fabrics and textiles (50). This agricultural crop became the foundational support for the booming 'Tunisian Chéchia' industry, which during the rule of the Deys and the early Muradids became the Regency's largest export to the Arab East and deep Africa, reflecting the profound impact of industrial agriculture on foreign trade (51).

• **The Fiscal System and its Social Impact on Rural Communities:**

- **Categories of Agricultural Taxes in the Regency:**

+ Canonical Taxes (Ouchr and Zakat): Agricultural taxation was the backbone and primary financial source feeding the makhzen treasury in Tunisia throughout the Ottoman era (52). Agricultural taxes were divided into two main categories: first, the Ouchr (tithe), an annual tax levied on grain, olive, and date crops at a rate of 10% for rain-fed lands, dropping to 5% for irrigated lands (53). Second was the Zakat tax, collected on livestock and herds. The Bey dispatched annual, seasonal military campaigns known as 'Mhalla' (the summer and winter Mhalla) to collect these taxes from settled and nomadic tribes in the central and southern regions (54).

+ Customary and Newly Imposed Taxes (Majba and Lazma): With the rise of Tunisia's external debts in the nineteenth century and the Beys' desire to cover financial deficits resulting from European loans, the Makhzen imposed oppressive, extraordinary taxes (55). The most prominent was the Majba (an annual capitation tax). In 1864 AD, Bey Sadok decided to double it from 36 to 72 piastres, igniting the famous 'Ali Ben Ghedhahem Revolution,' which saw the participation of most Tunisian tribes and nearly overthrew the regime (56). This was alongside the Lazma and Lozoum taxes, suddenly imposed on olive grove owners in the Sahel and orchard owners in Cap Bon (57).

- **The Affermage System and Social Repercussions:**

+ Contractor Greed and Tax Tyranny: The state resorted to selling the right to collect taxes in agricultural provinces to urban notables and major merchants through annual auctions known as Tadhmin or Iltizam (58). The contractor (Lazzam) paid the lump sum in advance to the Bey, then headed to the countryside to extract it from peasants through force and tyranny to secure a large personal profit margin, showing no regard for production conditions or climate factors (59).

+ The Phenomenon of Land Abandonment and Chronic Debt: This fiscal greed led to catastrophic results for rural society; peasants abandoned their fertile lands and fled to rugged mountains or the desert to escape the whips of tax collectors (60). Smallholders transformed into indebted sharecroppers (Khammes) under large feudal landlords, deepening poverty and plunging agricultural production to critical lows that amplified the country's economic vulnerability (61).

• **Climate Fluctuations, Crises, and Foreign Trade:**

- **Cyclical Droughts and Demographic Disasters:**



+ Years of Scarcity and Periodic Famines: Throughout the Ottoman era, Tunisian agriculture remained a prisoner to climate shifts and erratic rainfall; Tunisia suffered severe drought waves at an average rate of one or two dry years every five years (62). The lack of rain led directly to the failure of wheat and barley crops and the death of livestock, causing suffocating periodic famines (63).

+ Deadly Epidemics and Their Impact on the Labor Force: Seasons of scarcity were accompanied by outbreaks of deadly epidemics like plague and cholera, such as the plagues of 1784 AD and 1818 AD, which wiped out one-third of the rural population (64). This demographic devastation caused an acute, terrifying shortage in the agricultural labor force, leaving thousands of hectares of virgin land unplowed for long years, paralyzing the rural economy (65).

- Export Movements and the Bey's Commercial Policies:

+ Agricultural Exports to European Ports: In years of water abundance and political stability, especially during the reign of Hammouda Pacha Husainid (1782-1814 AD), Tunisian agriculture achieved massive production surpluses (66). The Regency became a major exporter of wheat, oil, and leather to European ports like Marseille (France), Livorno (Italy), and Malta, taking advantage of the Napoleonic Wars to secure excellent financial returns (67).

+ Makhzen Monopoly and the 'Cambio' System: The Bey imposed the 'Cambio' system, an absolute monopoly that prohibited peasants from exporting products except through official licenses that foreign companies purchased at exorbitant prices directly from the Bey (68). While this system secured a massive influx of funds for the Bey's treasury, the small farmer did not benefit from this boom, as they were forced to sell crops to the Makhzen at depressed prices arbitrarily set by the Bey, depriving the countryside of real investment to develop its tools (69).

Results and Recommendations

• Scientific Results Extracted:

- Link Between Production and Land Stability: It appears that land regimes based on private property (Melk) or endowments (Family Habous) achieved higher production stability compared to Beylik lands, which suffered from the abuses of tax contractors and Khamessat contracts that weakened peasant motivation.

- The Andalusian Ingenuity as a Technical Lever: The study proves that the Morisco arrival in 1609 AD was not just a population migration but an advanced technological transfer that transformed irrigation, irrigated farming, and industrial agriculture in the North and Cap Bon.

- Taxation as a Tool of Destruction: The research concludes that the structural crises of Tunisian agriculture in the nineteenth century were not merely due to natural factors (like drought) but were the direct result of a policy of extracting rural surplus through newly devised taxes (Majba and Lazma) to repay foreign debts.

- Land Preparation for Colonization: The weakening and bankruptcy of the Tunisian peasant opened the door for subsequent colonial land laws that allowed foreigners to buy land, making the countryside the first victim of the French intervention in 1881 AD.

• Recommendations and Future Horizons (Propositions):



- Necessity of Deepening Archive Research: Calling upon researchers and historians to further exploit the 'Dar El Bey' registers and unpublished tax documents to gather precise production figures for each region in the Regency.

- Re-evaluating Traditional Water Engineering: Capitalizing on the historical Andalusian and oasis experience (Ibn Chabbat's system) in water management to design sustainable irrigation systems suited to current water scarcity and climate change.

- Protecting Small Family Properties: The historical experience of the Tunisian Sahel confirms that stable family farming is the most resilient against crises, requiring the activation of contemporary development policies to support smallholders.

- Linking Agriculture with Industry: Reviving the concept of 'industrial agriculture' introduced by the Moriscos by linking local crops to processing industries to create stable jobs in the countryside and curb rural exodus.

General Conclusion

We conclude at the end of this intellectual journey that agriculture in Tunisia during the Ottoman era (1574-1881 AD) was not merely an economic activity, but the backbone of the social and political existence of the Tunisian Regency. Despite the technical leaps achieved thanks to Andalusian ingenuity, the agricultural structure remained trapped in a harsh duality: natural climate fluctuations on one hand, and the escalating tax pressure of the Makhzen on the other. Prioritizing immediate treasury benefits and the repayment of European loans at the expense of rural stability and its peasantry dragged the country into a spiral of revolutions and economic collapses. This process directly and tragically paved the way for the imposition of the French protectorate in 1881 AD, an inevitable outcome of an internal structural imbalance left neglected for too long.

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