

# On the Palace Housing the Tunisian Academy *Beit al-Hikma*

## Historical Background at a Glance

The present-day palace housing the Tunisian Academy *Beit al-Hikma* was built in the middle of the 19th century during the Husseinite era and was called Zarrouk Palace. The palace was erected on an ancient archaeological site at the foot of the Carthage hill next to Antonius Thermae overlooking the sea. Besides, the Arabic word Dermech had its origin from the Latin inscription *thermis* designating the site itself, and later the whole neighbourhood where the palace would be erected.

During an archaeological expedition in 1873-1874, De Sainte Marie claimed that he saw two palaces between the sea and the Byrsa hill : One belonged to Mustapha Ben Smail and the other to Ahmed Zarrouk. Both palaces had probably been erected on section number XVIII marking the maritime boundary of the Augustinian city. Within twenty meters from that place, a Phoenician community had settled in the Magon area during the 5th century BC.

During the same archaeological expedition De Sainte Marie discovered a huge statue representing the Empress Sabina, dating back to the 1st century AD, as well as votive inscriptions to Jupiter Serapis.

General Ahmed Zarrouk, son-in-law of Ali Bey and minister of war, built the present day palace in an Italianized architectural style, and made of it his private residence. Historian Ahmed Ibn Abi Dhiaf noted in his correspondence with Kheireddine : «M'Hamed Bey gave a plot of land with several warehouses *makhzan* on it and a well to General (Emir Liwa) Sidi Ahmed Zarrouk near the farm of Sidi lamine Bey, brother of Ahmed Pacha the first and urged him to build a castle *borj*».

Ahmed Zarrouk's mission was to crush the rebellion which was sparked off by the new reforms and the increase in capital levies the *mejba*, leaving horrible memories of ruthless brutality. When the Bey Mohamed Sadok died in 1882, Ahmed Zarrouk fell into disgrace and then died in 1889. His son Mohamed squandered the heritage and a guardian was appointed to sell his residence that was bought by Hai Bessis, and thus the Bessis domain started expanding along the coast of Carthage. Several official receptions were held in this palace, notably when Jules Ferry came to Tunisia accompanied by a delegation of senators and deputies.

In, 1922 the Bey Mohamed-el-Habib bought the Zarrouk palace and gave it to his son Lamine Bey (1943-1957), who was the last sovereign of the Husseinite dynasty. Lamine Bey introduced some modifications to the palace : he roofed the big internal patio which was so far in the open air, transformed the entrance façade and embellished it with a *mashrabia* and Beylical emblems and redecorated the ceiling. In the surrounding gardens, he built some extensions to house his family and his attendants, and departed from the Husseinite customs when he moved the throne hall from the first floor to the ground floor.

It was in this palace that self government for Tunisia was solemnly proclaimed by the French prime minister Pierre Mendès France (31/07/1954), the Code of Personal Status signed (13/08/1956) and the republic of Tunisia born (25/07/1957).

The splendid avenue downward to the sea was lined with majestic palm trees, and was probably named Palm Tree Avenue, and then became Roustan Avenue. Later, it was called Lamine Bey Avenue as he took possession of others sites next to the palace. Everyday, his coach, drawn by Breton horses, used to go up and down the beautiful Avenue with great pomp and splendor. After the abolition of the monarchy, it was given its present day name : Republic Avenue.

After the independence, the palace first became the head office of the National Office of Handicrafts, and later the National Institute of Archaeology (later becoming The Institute of National Heritage) and finally the National Foundation for Translation, Establishment of Texts and Studies Beït al-Hikma which in 1992 changed into the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts.