

Migrations | North–South movements | A matter of land: Agricultural settlements in Tunisia

A coin with two faces: both big French land-owning companies and poor southern European landless peasants settled in Tunisia.

In colonial Africa, land was the main source of conflict between the colonisers and the colonised. On the Mediterranean coast, this was the case of Algeria, which was seized by France in 1830 and where European settlement resulted in the eviction of Arab peasants. Tunisia (a protectorate and not a colony) did not experience comparable mass eviction of local peasants. After 1881, French authorities encouraged French settlements. Some big companies bought large tracts of land, but few French peasants settled in Tunisia, because they were better off in France. By contrast, many landless peasants from Italy and Malta settled in Tunisia, often as labourers or sharecroppers. In 1892, 400 French landowners had a total of 404,200ha. None of them lived there. The other 1,000 Europeans (mostly Italians) who owned land had a total of 27,350ha, and they all lived on their farms, working as peasants.



Working Number: IT1 124

Name: Italian peasants in Tunisia

Holding Museum: Italian Geographical Society (SGI)

Date: First years of the 20th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: Thousands of Italian immigrants in Tunisia initially worked as agricultural labourers. Over time, many were able to become sharecroppers and, after decades of saving, were able to buy land. The entire family participated in agricultural work, contributing to household welfare.



Working Number: FR 150

Name: Munchar - arrival of the post

Holding Museum: National Library of France

Date: 1904

Materials: -

Curator Justification: In Tunisia, during the first decades of the French Protectorate (1881–1956), the Italians largely outnumbered French settlers. In 1896, the French population amounted to 16,207 and the Italian to 55,572. French authorities considered this demographic imbalance a political threat and encouraged French peasants to settle in Tunisia by offering them incentives.



Working Number: FR 147

Name: Farmers and sharecroppers at Munchar with their families

Holding Museum: National Library of France

Date: 1904

Materials: -

Curator Justification: French governmental policy aimed at reducing the imbalance between French and Italian settlers in Tunisia was only partially successful.

The number of French residents grew, but so did that of the Italians. In 1911, the French population in Tunisia numbered 46,044 while the Italian one had risen to 81,156.



Working Number: FR 149

Name: Saint-Cyprien. Combine harvesters and sheaf binders on the road.

Holding Museum: National Library of France

Date: 1904

Materials: -

Curator Justification: The Société des fermes françaises de Tunisie was founded in 1899. By 1904, it owned 3,000ha of land (mostly in the region of Beja). By 1914, Europeans had acquired 920,000ha of land in Tunisia. Big landowning companies such as the Société employed European sharecroppers to run their farms, which were generally between 50 and 100ha.



Working Number: TN 022

Name: Colonial farms

Holding Museum: -

Date: 19th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: This colonial farm in Tunisia is modelled on French rural architecture. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the rural landscape in Tunisia was transformed by the construction of many European-style farmhouses.



Working Number: TN 021

Name: Colonial farms

Holding Museum: -

Date: 19th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: French and Italian settlers introduced new styles of peasant housing in the Tunisian countryside. Such buildings, which were very different from the peasant houses of the local tradition, made the presence of European settlers evident at first glance.



Working Number: FR 148

Name: St. Cyprien. Post office. School.

Holding Museum: National Library of France

Date: 1904

Materials: -

Curator
Justification:

In 1903, 20 children attended this small rural school, established on the estates of Saint Cyprien, owned by one of the most powerful French landowning companies, the Société des fermes françaises de Tunisie.
