

Villas, wine and kilns: the landscape of Jerba in the late Hellenistic period

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Introduction: the Jerba Project

The island of Jerba emerges unobtrusively from its shallow waters. The landscape is flat, the vegetation varies from scrubland to sparse palms to large olive trees whose ample root-stocks suggest several centuries of life. The olive groves are ploughed to allow every possible drop of water to reach the roots. Dry farming of cereals is more or less pointless although, when rain is plentiful, barley will be thinly sown on land that is otherwise uncultivated. In this driest of Mediterranean zones, plentiful rain is barely more than the few showers which the 200-mm isohyet would suggest. In the interior of the island a few estates maintain irrigated cultivation, the luxuriant results of which recall Pliny's description of the oasis of Tacape;¹ palms shelter fruit trees, which shelter pomegranates, which in turn shelter little vegetable plots. Wells provide water for these systems, the water trickling into the gardens through tiny channels (*sāqiya*). Today the water is pumped, but in the past each bucket had to be laboriously raised by mules or camels; their ramps form a distinctive component of the systems. High walls of mud (*ṭābiya*) enclose the irrigated gardens. However, in spite of the technological improvements, these gardens are less plentiful than in the past and, as the water table falls, it is more common to find an abandoned well than one in use.

The reasons for the progressive abandonment of the only intensive agriculture on the island are multiple, but the most obvious are to be found on the N coast, where massive hotels are arranged three-deep along the beaches. Behind them, villas and four-lane roads are replacing the landscape of dirt tracks and *ṭābiya* walls, intact as little as two decades ago. This progressive destruction of the landscape and archaeology of the island was one of the reasons for the creation of the Jerba Project, a joint undertaking of the Institut National du Patrimoine, the American Academy in Rome, and the University of Pennsylvania. We intended to record as much as possible of the island's sites of all periods in order to reconstruct its settlement history. The historical interest of the island is obvious: its position just off the southern coast of Tunisia puts it close to the shipping lanes crossing from Lepcis Magna towards Carthage and makes it an essential stopping-place for anyone sailing up or down the coast. In the Middle Ages, its merchants were found in Sicily, Spain, and Egypt, while its products, from slaves to water jars, were known throughout the central Mediterranean. At the same time, its relative isolation from the Tunisian mainland made it an ideal refuge in times of insecurity. Without the causeway that today, as in antiquity, connected it to the mainland, Jerba is relatively inaccessible, and its shallow waters require an experienced pilot to navigate them. Indeed, Polybius relates that in 253 B.C. a Roman fleet intent on pillage was grounded off Meninx, and was saved only by a high tide after jettisoning all its cargo.² This kind of position was a typical choice for Phoenician settlement: like the islands of Arwad, Tyre, Motya and Mogador, Jerba offered convenient access to the mainland while preserving a protective distance from it. In later centuries, the island's status as a refuge was exploited by the Kharejites, or Ibadis, an Islamic sect whose presence on the island is recorded from the 9th c. onwards. Berbers of this sect today form the dominant group on the island, although until 1967 there was a substantial Jewish community, concentrated in the villages of Hara Segira and Hara Kebira, that claims origins in the first Diaspora in the first half of the 6th c. B.C. It was certainly a major force on the island in the early Middle Ages.³

1 NH 18.188.

2 Polyb. 1.39; Pseudo-Scylax (*Geographi Graeci minores* [ed. Müller] 110) refers to the island as 'Bracchion' because of these shallows.

3 S. Simonsohn, *The Jews in Sicily* vol. 1, 383-1200 (New York 1997); A. L. Udovitch and L. Valensi, *Juifs*