

The Tunisian Mediterranean Sea waters and islands

"Naming issues"

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Abstract

This paper gives an overview about the Mediterranean Sea. Focus is brought to the Tunisian Mediterranean littoral and its components particularly the gulfs, the lakes and the islands; wonderful sites which contribute to the beauty of the country and its economic development. Highlights on their naming are also shaded in this paper according to the availability of reliable data sources.

General background

The Mediterranean -centre of the earth, cradle of the civilization- holds a unique place in our collective consciousness. Although it occupies an area no more than 7% of the total area of oceans in the world, its influence on human behaviour and world events belies its modest size. The name is applied not only to the sea but to the area around it, its people, vegetation, climate, countries - and way of life¹

The name Mediterranean is derived from the Latin *mediterraneus*, meaning "inland" or "in the middle of the earth". Its Arabic name is "البحر الأبيض المتوسط", Al-Bahr al-Abyadh Al-Mutawassit, meaning "the White Middle Sea".

The Mediterranean Sea was the greatest water route for merchants and travelers of ancient times, allowing for trade and cultural exchange between civilizations. Indeed, the historical record of civilizations around the borders of the sea indicates that

¹ European Space Agency: Applications of satellite remote sensing over the Mediterranean Sea.

significant changes in sea level have occurred like the ancient port of Carthage which has been far removed from harbor facilities¹.

A coastal country per excellence, Tunisia has a coastline of around 1,300 kilometers long. An abrupt southward turn of the Mediterranean coast in northern Tunisia gives the country two distinctive Mediterranean coasts, west-east in the north, and north-south in the east. The coastal areas are home to 64% of the total population and the most concentrated economic activities of the country.

Tunisia's strategic location and rich agricultural lands attracted many waves of settlers whose presence has contributed to a cultural and ethnic blend of peoples. Berbers, Numidians, Phoenicians/Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Normans, Arabs, Spaniards, Sicilians, Maltese, Turks and French have all mingled on this small territory². Many prestigious sites, either archeological or maritime, are still witnessing about the bright civilizations that succeeded one another in Tunisia. The city of Carthage founded by the Phoenicians is a pertinent example. This metropolis, an exceptional place of mixing, diffusion and blossoming of several cultures, with its ports has been a major maritime power in the Mediterranean basin³.

This led to the geographical names in Tunisia to be a mixture of different languages and subject to several linguistic alterations, leading sometimes to make some names lose their real identity.

The Tunisian Mediterranean Gulfs, lakes and islands

The Tunisian Mediterranean coast is composed of 3 main gulfs, 5 lakes which four of them called also lagoons and a large number of islands (about 60 islands); some uninhabited, others grouped in archipelago, also others, often little more than an isolated rocky outcrop, are actually teeming with wildlife or designated as protected national park areas. Only the most important islands will be mentioned in this paper. The Tunisian Mediterranean features are named after the regions that coast them; others bear names which are a mixture of different languages reflecting the country's rich history.

a. The Tunisian Mediterranean Gulfs (Figure 1)

² Tunisia News NO 699 March 10, 2007: *Mediterranean heritage, History and culture*.

³ Naïma FRIHA: *A place, a toponym, a cultural Heritage: The legendary story of the foundation of CARTHAGE-BYRSA* (The winner paper of the UNGEGN 1st prize, Vienna May 2011).

The Gulf of Tunis (Tunis): (Arabic : خليج تونس) is a large gulf in northeastern Tunisia, located at around 37°N, 10.5°E and extending over nearly 150 km. The central part of the Gulf is the city of Tunis and the main sites of the gulf are the "Bay of Tunis", a highly urbanized coastal area.

The Gulf of Tunis communicates with the lake of Tunis through a canal 28 meters wide, called in french "le Goulet ", meaning bottleneck from which is derived « in Italian Goletta, in French La Goulette, in Arabic: حلق الوادي Halk-el-Wad, throat of the canal). La Goulette is the city where is located 'the harbour of La Goulette" built after the destruction of the Punic port facilities of Carthage at the beginning of the Arab conquest.

The Gulf of Tunis bears its name from the capital city Tunis. The name of Tunis can be attributed to different origins. It can be associated with the Phoenician goddess "Tanith (aka Tunit)"⁴, or to the Berber root " ens " which means "to lie down". Given the variations in the vowel space and time, the name of Tunis very likely mean "camp» or "stop"⁵.

The Gulf of Hammamet (Nabeul): (Arabic: خليج الحمامات) is a large gulf in northeastern Tunisia, located south to the Gulf of Tunis at around 36°5' N 10°45' E.

The gulf is boarded in the north by the old city of Hammamet and in the south by the 'Yasmine El Hammamet", both of them are famous Tunisian vacation resort cities.

Hammamet (ancient Puppet), was known in Roman times for its baths and spas "steam". The word Hammamet is the plural of the Arabic "حمام hammam" meaning "bath".

The Gulf of Gabes (Gabes): (Arabic: خليج قابس), is a large gulf in the center eastern Tunisia with a latitude 34° 0' 0 N and a longitude of 10° 25' 0 E and which extends over 200kms from Sfax to the Island of Djerba.

The Gulf of Gabes is among the most productive fishing areas of the Mediterranean Sea (making 61% of the Tunisian fishing fleet).

The Gulf is subject to a strong pollution related to human activities and especially the highly industrialized nearby areas.

The Gulf of Gabes holds its name from the City of Gabes that costs it. Gabes is built by the Phenicians during the 2nd century B.C. Its name is the corruption of the ancient

⁴ Taylor, Isaac (2008): *Names and Their Histories: A Handbook of Historical Geography and Topographical Nomenclature*. BiblioBazaar, LLC. p. 281. ISBN 0559296681.

⁵ Paul Sebag : *Tunis. Histoire d'une ville*, éd. L'Harmattan, 1998.

toponym Tacape. It is also known as Lesser Syrtis or Syrtis Minor (from Greek Σύρτις), contrasting with the Greater Syrtis in Libya⁶.

b. The Tunisian Mediterranean Lakes (Figure 1)

The lake of Bizerte (Bizerte): (Arabic: بحيرة بنزرت), also known as the lagoon of Bizerte, is located south Bizerte at around 37° 10' 60 N and 9° 52' 0 E, it covers 120 km² and has an average depth of seven meters up to twelve meters.

The lake hosts the commercial port of Bizerte in two sites. Industry including heavy ones (steel, oil refinery, processing waste lubricants, cement), with Tourism and Fisheries including shellfish are the most developed economic activities of the area. The waters of the lake may suffer from industrial pollution caused by the industrial factories built around.

The lake bears the name of the City of Bizerte. It was consecutively called: Hippou Acra (Phenician); Hippo Diarrhytus (Roman); Hippone Zarito (Greek); بنزرت - Binzart (Arabic); the French exonym Bizerte is an alteration of Binzart⁷.

The Lake of Ichkeul (Bizerte): (Arabic: بحيرة اشكل) is located at 37°10'0"N and 9°40'0"E and is connected to the lake of Bizerte via a channel.

The lake features in three international conventions on the protection of nature: the Ramsar Convention on major international humid zones, the UNESCO World Heritage Convention since 1980 and the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Convention. The Park with the Lake is an important stopping-over point for hundreds of thousands of migrating birds each year. Ichkeul plays an important socio-economic role.

The Lake of Ghar El Melh (Bizerte): (Arabic: بحيرة غار الملح) is a natural lagoon located in the northeast of Tunisia at around 35 kms from Bizerte.

Its ancient port indicates that the region has a lengthy history due to its strategic position. It was first inhabited by the Phoenicians, later conquered by the Romans who were followed by many others such as the Vandals, Byzantines, Spaniards, Arabs, Ottomans and the French. The city is known for its very well-preserved 15th century Spanish fort, its Turkish fortresses, its old bath-houses and the 17th-18th century prisons.

⁶ National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (2002) Section 8: Tunisia-Cap Serrat to RasAjdir "Sailing Directions (Enroute) for Western Mediterranean".

⁷ Evelyne Ben Jaafar: *Les Noms des Lieux en Tunisie*, Racines vivantes de l'Identité Nationale.

Many factors like the stagnant waters, the lagoon siltation, the accumulation of organic matters, the big modifications of physic-chemical parameters caused by the meteorological conditions have caused the degradation of the ecosystem quality.

The lake is named after the region of Ghar El Melh, a village located in the northwestern Gulf of Tunis. The name Ghar El Melh (غار الملح), an Arabic name meaning "cave of salt" is due to the proximity of salt, it is formerly known as Porto Farina or Cap Farina.

The Lake of Tunis (Tunis): (Arabic : بحيرة تونس) is a natural lagoon located at 36° 49' 10"N and 10° 14' 49" E between the capital Tunis and the Gulf of Tunis. The lake covers a total of 37 km²; in contrast to its size its depth is very shallow.

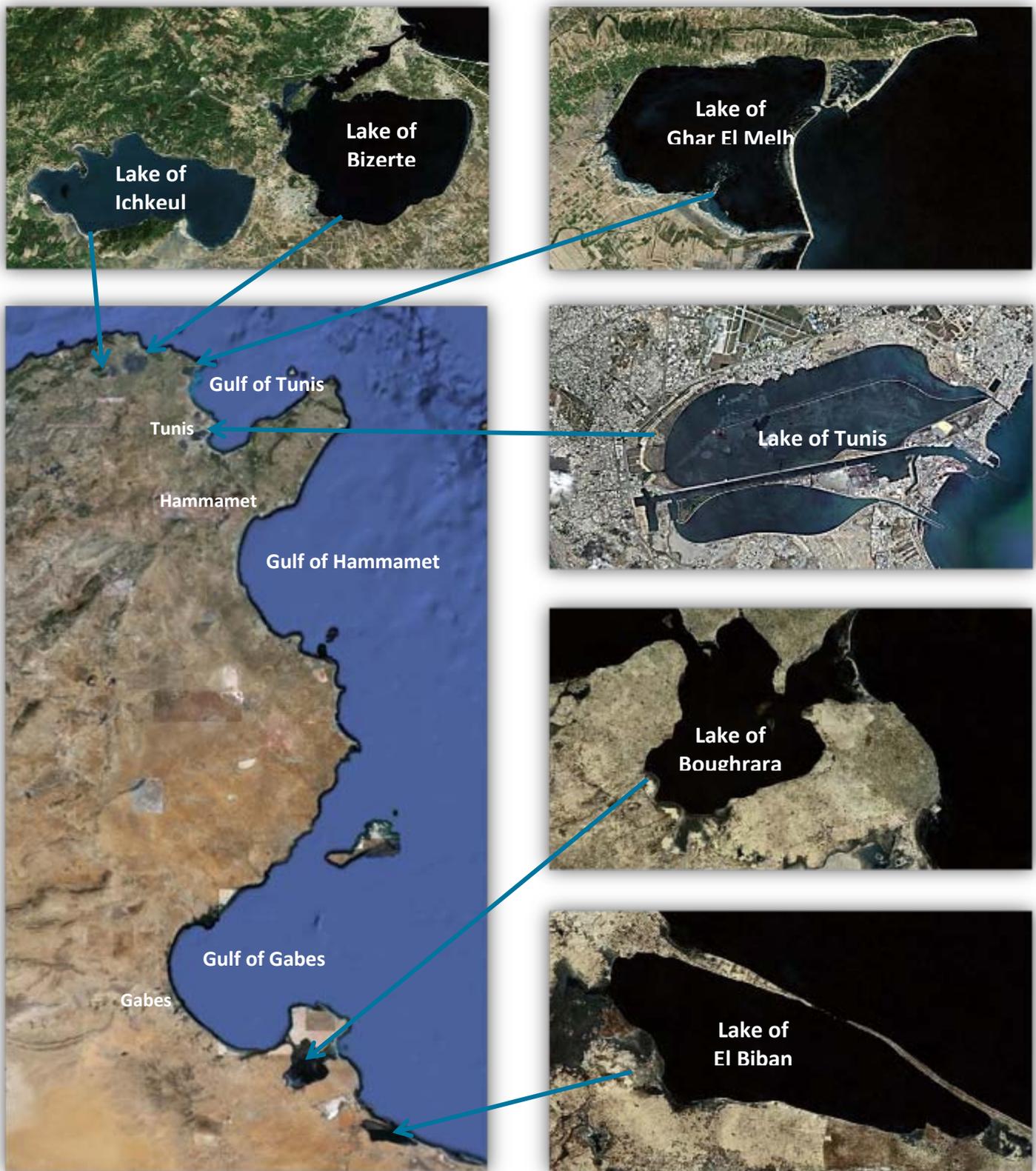
The lake has served since the arrival of the Phoenicians, as the first port of Carthage. A dam built in the past by the Romans to connect Tunis to Carthage, is used today as an expressway for automobiles and railway, connecting Tunis to the La Goulette harbour. The northern lake includes the island of Chikly.

The lake or the lagoon of BouGhrara (Medenine): (Arabic: بحيرة بوغرارة), is a 500 km² area, located at the southern part of Tunisia between 10°40' to 10°57' E and 33°28' to 33°45' N. It is a semi closed little sea with a limited access to the golf of Gabes and close to the Djerba Island.

The lagoon is known by its biological productivity particularly high fishery production. But since 1992, the production has been steadily decreasing mainly because of the wastes coming from the nearby chemical factories, producing phosphoric acid and other phosphate related chemical products.

The lagoon is known by its biological productivity particularly high fishery production.

The lake of El Bibane or Bahiret el Bibane (Medenine):(Arabic: بحيرة الببيان) is a lagoon located south of Tunisia at 33° 15' 0 N and 11° 16' 0 E. The lagoon constitutes one of the biggest fishing productivity sites. The heritage of this wetland is recognized internationally by the Ramsar Mediterranean project.



(Figure 1): The Tunisian Mediterranean gulfs and lakes

c. The Tunisian Mediterranean Islands (Figure 2)

The Galite Islands (Bizerte): (Arabic: جزر جالطة) are an archipelago of rocky islands of volcanic origin located at 37° 31' 38 N and 8° 56' 10 E, 38km north west of Cape Serrat (Bizerte) and 150 km south of Cape Spartivento in the south of Sardinia.

The Galite archipelago has six islands in total: La Galite, the largest island (5.4km long and 2.9km wide), Le Galiton, La Fauchelle, Le Gallo, Le Pollastro and Gallina.

Le Galiton was, in 1980, declared by the Ministry of Agriculture, a natural reserve to protect the Mediterranean monk seals, and fishing has been forbidden for 3.5 kms around the islands.

The archipelago has been in the past inhabited by mixed population of Tunisians, Sicilians and Sardinians which may explain the origin of its Italian names. Now only few fishermen's families are living there.

La Galite is the alteration of the Roman name Galathae Insulae⁸.

The Tabarka Island (Jendouba): (Arabic: جزيرة طبرقة) is located at 36° 57' 52 N and 8° 45' 43 E, in the north-western part of Tunisia, just 1km north of Tabarka's marina and is linked to the mainland by a strip of sand constructed by the French in World War II.

Tabarka's history is a colorful mosaic of Phoenician, Roman, Arabic and Turkish civilizations. The town is dominated by an offshore rock on which is built a Genoese castle as well as ruins including a church and some Genoese buildings are still seen on the island.

Tabarka is famous for its coral fishing, its panoramic view combining sea and forests and for its international jazz festival.

Tabarka is an alteration of the Roman Thabraca which is the Latin name of a Roman Catholic titular see of the former Roman province of Numidia near the Mediterranean, between the Armua and the Tusca⁹.

According to other sources, Thabraca means the places of shadows. It seems to be related to the huge and dense forests there.

The Fratelli Islands (Bizerte): are uninhabited islands located two miles from Kef El Abed (Bizerte), a pristine beach lying at the foot of a hill covered in forest, at 37° 18' 25 N and 9° 24' 34 E. Little more than two rocks, they are home to hawks.

⁸ Evelyne Ben Jaafar: *Les Noms des Lieux en Tunisie*, Racines vivantes de l'Identité Nationale.

⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thabraca>.

In Italian, "Fratelli" is the plural of "fratello" which means "frère, brother", The Fratelli islands are also called in French "les Iles Frères".

The Cani islands (Bizerte): are uninhabited islands located 10km north of Cape Zebib (Bizerte) at 37° 21' 0 N and a 10° 7' 0 E and are composed of two islands, Grande Cani and Petite Cani.

The Cani Islands or sometimes called in French "Les Iles des Chiens" or "the Islands of Dogs". In Italian, "Cani" is the plural of "cano" which means "dog".

The Island Of Pilau (Raf Raf-Bizerte): is an uninhabited island lying only a mile off the coast of RafRaf, a coastline near to Bizerte at 37° 12' 0 N and 10° 15' 0 E. Pilau is 116 metres high and offers an incredibly beautiful view.

There are several suggestions as to how the island got its name. Pilau comes from the Maltese Pulu, meaning "island." Sailors in the region called the island "the Pilau rock," translated into Arabic by "Haaajret Pilau - حجرة بيلو"¹⁰.

The Plane Island (Bizerte): is an uninhabited island located 2.3 miles off the coast of Bizerte at 37° 10' 55 N and 10° 19' 52 E. It is a very flat-topped island, 8 metres above sea level.

The Chikly Island-Tunis): (Arabic: شكلي) is a small island, that extends over 1.5 hectares in the middle of the northern lake of Tunis at 36° 49' 3 N and 10° 13' 7 E. The island is extremely shallow water. Researches and digs have unveiled important Punic, Roman, Byzantine and Spanish vestiges. The island shelters a castle known to 'house Fort Santiago Chikly', built over Roman and Byzantine vestiges in terms of advanced defense for the city¹¹. The Chikli is a refuge to a wide variety of bird populations. In 1993, the Island was declared a national cultural heritage.

Chikly, as some historians argue, has its origins. The name "Chekla" possibly derived from Arabic and means "the Coquettish or attractive" was attributed to the island by the historian El-Bakri in the XIth century. In the work of Ibn Abi Dinar Al Kairouani in the XVIIth century, figures the name Chikli. Others think that the name is given from the Italians of Syracuse, a city built on a rock known as Scili. During the Spanish reign on the island that lasted 40 years, various names were given to the island: Fort Etang, Santia Island etc... The island regained its former name "the Island of Chikly" in 1574 after the defeat of the Spaniards by the Ottoman troops¹².

¹⁰ <http://www.nomarmiteintunisia.co.uk/tunisiasislands.htm>

¹¹ Tunisia News N°619 July 9, 2005: Article 'Regions': *Chikly the island of a thousand stories.*

¹² Tunisia News N°619 July 9, 2005: Article 'Regions': *The origins of the name.*

The Islands Of Zembra And Zembretta (Nabeul): Zembra (Arabic: Jamour Al Kabir, (جامورالكبير) or also (زمبرة) and Zembretta (Arabic: Jamour as Saghir, (جامور الصغير) are Lying in the Gulf of Tunis, at 37° 7' 60 N and 10° 48' 0 E. Zembra is a tiny mountain island rising to a peak of 435 meters, while five kilometers away is Zembretta, a rocky formation only 400 meters long and 50 meters wide crowned by a lighthouse. The islands of Zembra and Zembretta have been classified by UNESCO since 1977 as a protected National Park area. There are no inhabitants and the only human activity is scientific research. Its natural fortress is currently used by the Tunisian army, and on its southern coast one can see remains of an ancient port.

Zembra has many rare plants and a marine nature reserve, where around the coast can be seen monk seals, it also hosts more than 25,000 pairs of migratory birds that often nest in the rocky cliffs.

Researches and digs have unveiled Punic and Roman vestiges and according to historians, the Islands had constituted a strategic point for the Phoenicians and Roman floats. "

The Aegimuri Insulae" is the ancient name for the islands¹³.

The Kuriat Islands (Monastir): (Arabic: جزر قورية) are situated 18 km from the coast of Monastir and south to the gulf of Hammamet at 35° 47' 60 N and 11° 1' 60 E. They consist of two small islands: Little Kuriat (Kuria Es Sghira قورية الصغيرة) which is 0.7 km² and the Great Kuriat (Kuria EL Kbira قورية الكبيرة) which is 2.7 kms² area.

The coastal area of the islands is a near-natural state and has no development or inhabitants, except few touristic visitors. The islands represent an important nesting site for the loggerhead Caretta turtle.

The Islands of Kerkennah (Sfax): (Arabic: جزر قرقنة) lie in the Gulf of Gabes, 20km off the port of Sfax at 34° 45' 29 N and 11° 4' 7 E. The Islands are low-lying being no more than 13 meters above sea level. There are 7 islands, of which the largest Chergui and Gharbi are home to around 15,000 inhabitants. A ferry links the islands to the city of Sfax. The islands are flat, arid and very hot.

Fishing, including huge octopus one, is a key industry of Kerkennah, there is even an octopus Festival held every year in Kerkennah.

The island was seized by different civilizations through its history (Roman, Italian, Spanish, Hafsid...).

The islands were originally called "Cercina" ¹⁴.

¹³ -¹⁴ Evelyne Ben Jaafar: *Les Noms des Lieux en Tunisie*, Racines vivantes de l'Identité Nationale.

The Kneis Islands (Sfax): (Arabic: جزر الكناس) are uninhabited islands located in the Gulf of Gabes at 34° 22' 0 N and 10° 19' 0 E. They are made up of 4 islands: El Bessila, El Hajar, El Laboua, and El Gharbia.

Being a marine nursery for breeding and propagation of fish and shellfish in the area of the Gulf of Gabes, the site is also a haven for a variety of seabirds local and migrants in the Mediterranean region (around 330,000 different species). The islands were declared a protected site since 1993, and an area under protection and of special importance in the Mediterranean, since 2001.

The Island of Djerba (Medenine): (Arabic: جزيرة جربة) is located in the Gulf of Gabes at 33° 47' 60 N and 10° 54' 0 E, it is 20x20 km, with a population of around 150,000. It is connected to the mainland by a road, originally built by the Romans and also by a ferry. Djerba Island is the major Tunisian tourist resort.

Some of its original inhabitants are said to have been local Berbers, (Djerba is one of the few places in Tunisia where a Berber language is still spoken). Djerba also has a sizeable minority of Maltese Catholics and Jewish. Each year Jewish pilgrimage takes place in the "Al Ghriba Synagogue" of Djerba, a Jewish temple over 2,000 years.

Throughout its history, different nations have occupied Djerba like the Ibadhites (Islamic sect Al-Ibadhiyah), the Sicilians, the Spanish, the Ottomans, and the French.

According to some sources, the island originally had the names of Lotophagi Island. The Lotophagi (or Lotophagoi) ("lotus-eaters") were a race of people who eat lotus plants. (The lotus fruits and flowers were the primary foodstuff of the island and were narcotic, causing the people to sleep in peaceful apathy)¹⁵.

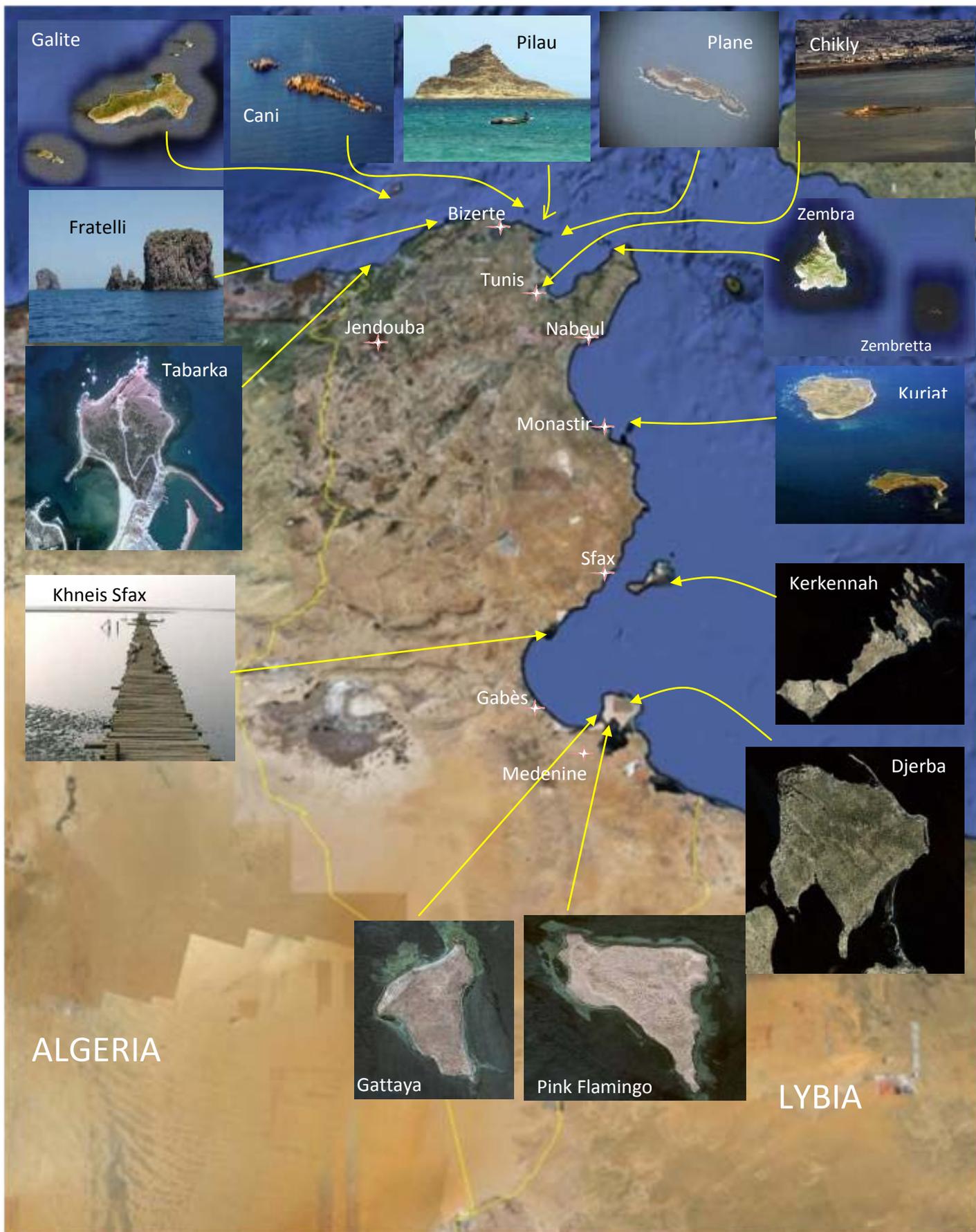
Girba was also the name of the island in the Roman time from which the current name Djerba is derived¹⁶.

The Gattaya Island (Medenine): (Arabic: جزيرة القطعاية) is an uninhabited island of 214 acres and situated around 2kms South west from Djerba at 10°43 E and 33°44 N.

The Pink Flamingo Island - Medenine: or "L'ile des Flamants Roses" is located 45 minutes off the coast of Djerba, it is an uninhabited island and a retreat for pink flamingos. It is an attractive place for many visitors coming from the Island of Djerba.

¹⁵ <http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Mythology/Lotophagi.html>.

¹⁶ Evelyne Ben Jaafar: *Les Noms des Lieux en Tunisie*, Racines vivantes de l'Identité Nationale.



(Figure 2):The Tunisian Mediterranean Islands

Conclusion

Tunisia's strategic location and rich agricultural lands attracted many waves of settlers whose presence has contributed to a cultural and ethnic blend of peoples. Also its Mediterranean 1,148 kilometers coastline long and its mild climate made it a coastal country par excellence and encouraged human settlement and a succession of cultures to grow up on its shores. This led to the geographical names, mainly those related to the Tunisian coastal sites, to be a mixture of Lybic, Berber, Phoenician, Roman, Arabic, Spanish, Italian, French and other languages.

We can see that names like the 'Fratelli islands' and the 'Cani islands' may witness about the Italian presence; others like 'Kerkennah' , 'Tabarka' , Djerba which are corruptions of the respectively 'Cercina' , 'Thabraka' , Girba of the Roman time. Those corruptions resulted from the alterations that those names have undergone through the time and which led to an ununderstandable meaning for them; others, although they are exonyms, they become endonyms like the Italian name of the island of 'Zembra' which is often called and written in official Arabic ' زمبرة -Zembra' and almost never جامور الكبير - and جامور الصغير .-

All this heterogeneity of names witnesses about the important role the sea has played in gathering different peoples around it and in tying relations between them and between it and them. Although those people have disappeared, their history' evolutions in the places they occupied and lived in have been tracked and the geographical name has played an important role in this and has served as an important witness to that enduring heritage that absolutely needs to be preserved.

Some years ago Sarah Arenson, author of the 'Encircled Sea', wrote about the Mediterranean Sea:

"The civilisations which have evolved on its shores shaped the history of mankind. Since pre-historic time the relationship between man and the sea has been stronger around the Mediterranean than anywhere else. For this reason the Mediterranean may serve as a living laboratory, in which new ways of understanding and furthering that relationship can be developed"¹⁷.

¹⁷ European Space Agency: Applications of satellite remote sensing over the Mediterranean Sea.

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