

Sa'dian Morocco and the Dialectics of Early Modern Empire

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Birthing between the southern legs of the High and Anti-Atlas mountains, Morocco's Sa'dian dynasty was perpetually wedged between the fiercest rivalries of the early modern period. To its east stood the Ottoman Empire, to its north the Spanish, and along its western coast the Portuguese. Meanwhile, its Atlantic ports and Saharan trade networks were drawing a motley group of merchants, privateers, and emissaries of the English, Dutch, Genoese, and Venetian variety. Archival sources from the Sa'dian period feature a star-studded lineup of early modern contemporaries: Askia Muhammad, Catherine de Medici, Elizabeth I, Ferdinand Magellan, Hayreddin Barbarossa, Henry VIII, John Smith, Leo Africanus, Mary Queen of Scots, Philip II, and Sultan Suleiman, to name a few.

Even though Fernand Braudel had very little to say about Sa'dian Morocco in *La Méditerranée*, its place just before the book's conclusion is reflective of its peripherality. Braudel mentions Sa'dian Morocco within the context of the 1578 Battle of Alcázarquivir (commonly known as the Battle of Three Kings). Appearing in a single paragraph, Sa'dian Morocco is introduced just as the Mediterranean is fading "out of the limelight" and the Atlantic enters center stage. "For North Africa," Braudel writes, "it was the end of an era: no longer was it an outpost of the East."¹ Such framing perhaps seems out of the ordinary for Braudel, especially in a text that emphasizes the vastness and overlapping nature of the Mediterranean as a rejection of rigid categories of order. Instead, however, I argue that Braudel leaves us with an invitation to consider the generative capacity of the Maghrib's spatiotemporal limit.

Reigning from the mid-sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries, Morocco's Sa'dian dynasty offers a unique snapshot into one of the early modern world's vital frontiers of border making. Whether at the end of the Mediterranean, on the fringes of the East, the beginning of the Atlantic, the border between Africa and Europe, along the edges of the Islamic and Christian worlds, or

¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972–73), 2:1195.

straddling the fault lines of blackness and whiteness, Sa'dian Morocco was where limits were forged and eventually cemented. None of the Sa'dian rulers demonstrated a keen awareness of this reality more than Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur (1578–1603). Under his reign, Sa'dian Morocco reached unprecedented heights of wealth, territorial control, and power—all of this despite being surrounded by empires that exceeded it on all those fronts. What drove this seemingly anomalous reality, I argue, was how Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur understood that to maintain any semblance of Moroccan sovereignty and autonomy meant having to pragmatically exist alongside the competing interests and threats of external forces. This meant neither docile acquiescence nor reckless resistance. Rather, it entailed a total descent into the crossfires of the Ottoman-Spanish-Tudor English imperial triangle. Three key episodes offer insight into how Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur honed this empire-building strategy: the Battle of Three Kings (1578), the Portugal Expedition (1589), and the Sa'dian invasion of the Songhai Empire (1591).

Episode 1: The Battle of Three Kings (1578)

Up until 1574, the standard practice of Sa'dian succession was for the eldest brother of the deceased sultan to inherit the throne. In the absence of any living or viable fraternal lines, it would then go to the eldest son. When Sultan Abdallah al-Ghalib (r. 1557–1574) ascended to the throne, he swiftly pursued an aggressive policy of fratricide. His only two surviving brothers, 'Abd al-Malik and Ahmad al-Mansur, sought refuge in the Ottoman Empire, where they held key positions in the administration and military over the course of seventeen years—nearly the entirety of their brother's reign.² After al-Ghalib's death, his son Mohammad al-Mutawakkil inherited the throne despite the fact that 'Abd al-Malik and Ahmad al-Mansur both had superseding claims to rule as surviving brothers of al-Ghalib. Backed by the Ottomans, 'Abd al-Malik and Ahmad al-Mansur successfully seized the throne from their nephew in 1576, marking the beginning of 'Abd al-Malik's reign. Meanwhile, their nephew, al-Mutawakkil, fled to Europe where he began rallying support for his cause of deposing his uncle, managing to convince only Portuguese King Dom Sebastian I (r. 1557–1578).

On August 4, 1578, al-Mutawakkil and Dom Sebastian I marched onto the riverine city of Ksar El Kbir, along with around 6,000 mercenaries paid for by Pope Gregory XIII and arms provided by King Philip II of Spain. Awaiting this impending battle were 'Abd al-Malik and Ahmad al-Mansur, equipped with the remainder of the Ottoman forces that had helped them seize the throne two years prior and ammunition sent by Queen Elizabeth I of England. The battle was over after a mere four hours and three kings were now dead: al-Mutawakkil drowned in the Makhazin River, Dom Sebastian (unmarried and childless) was killed in battle, and 'Abd al-Malik died before the battle even began due to drinking contaminated water. 'Abd al-Malik's younger brother, Ahmad al-Mansur, was named the new sultan on the battlefield. One of the first actions Ahmad al-Mansur took as sultan was to flay and stuff al-Mutawakkil's body with straw, after which it was put on display throughout Morocco. The incident resulted in the disparaging memorialization of al-Mutawakkil in Moroccan sources as al-Meslough, "the Flayed."³ In

² Abderrahmane El-Moudden, "Sharif and Padishahs: Moroccan–Ottoman Relations from the Sixteenth through the Eighteenth Centuries. Contribution to the Study of a Diplomatic Culture" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1992), 65.

³ Mohammed al-Ifrani, *Nozhet al-hadi: fi akhbar muluk al-qarn al-hadi* (Dar Bouregrag lil tiba'a wa al-nashr, 2018); Abd al-Aziz al-Fishtali, *Manahil assafa'a fi ma'athir mawalina ashurafa* (Matbua'at wizarat al-awqaf wa

addition to the thousands who died on both sides, Ahmad al-Mansur held the surviving 14,000 Portuguese soldiers captive, including much of the Portuguese aristocracy. With neither ruling elite nor designated successor, the fate of Portugal's future was in question. Ahmad al-Mansur was well-positioned to determine its direction.

Episode 2: The Portugal Expedition (1589)

In the immediate months following the Battle of Three Kings, news of Dom Sebastian I's heirless death remained secret in an effort to defer the inevitable crisis. Philip II, however, was well-informed, as usual. His agents in Morocco, a fraternal duo of Corsican merchants, quickly sent word of the battle's outcome.⁴ In response, Philip II promptly deployed Spanish forces throughout Portuguese-controlled territory in Africa and the Americas under the guise of ensuring their "security."⁵ By 1580, the Portuguese Succession Crisis was in full swing as Philip II formally stepped in to fill the power vacuum in Portugal. Meanwhile, in Morocco, among the Portuguese elite held captive by Ahmad al-Mansur was one Don Antonio, grandson of King Manuel I of Portugal (1469–1521) and former governor of the Portuguese-held port of Tangier.⁶ Not only did his royal lineage elevate him as a legitimate contender for the Portuguese throne, but several parties were particularly keen on supporting his candidacy if it meant weakening Philip II's position. Among Don Antonio's most enthusiastic backers were Queen Elizabeth I and Catherine de Medici.

Ahmad al-Mansur eventually released Don Antonio into the care of Catherine de Medici and, later, Elizabeth I. For years, Ahmad al-Mansur maintained an ambiguous position concerning the fate of Don Antonio, as demonstrated in the numerous letters exchanged with his French and English counterparts. In 1588, however, Ahmad al-Mansur shifted in his tone and became exceedingly supportive of the plan to place Don Antonio on the Portuguese throne in lieu of Philip II. One major event that would have likely swayed him was Elizabeth I's unexpected victory over Philip II's Spanish Armada. Galvanized by the English victory, with Ahmad al-Mansur on board and Don Antonio having promised Brazil to Catherine de Medici in exchange for her support, Elizabeth I moved ahead with a counter English Armada in 1589. The expedition devolved into a major naval disaster for England. Among the key factors that led to England's defeat was that Ahmad al-Mansur reneged on his commitment to provide reinforcements and material support. For three years, Elizabeth I pleaded with Ahmad al-Mansur for some explanation of his withdrawal. In March 1592, he finally responded to Elizabeth I, claiming he had been preoccupied with a more important matter, but he assured her that it would be of

shu'un al-islamiyya wa al-thaqafa, 1972).

⁴ Francisco Gasparo Corso and Andrea Gasparo Corso covertly worked on behalf of Philip II in North Africa. While 'Abd al-Malik was in exile in the Ottoman Empire, he fought for the Ottomans in the Battle of Lepanto and was captured by the Spanish in the process. The Spanish released him soon after under unclear circumstances. It turned out that 'Abd al-Malik had befriended Andrea Gasparo Corso during his captivity, and the two managed to negotiate the beginnings of a secret treaty between Morocco and Spain. The treaty was later ratified between 'Abd al-Malik and Philip II in 1577, after which the Gasparo Corso brothers remained welcome guests in the Sa'dian court; see *Les sources inédites de l'histoire du Maroc: Archives et bibliothèques d'Espagne*, ser. 1, vol. 3, ed. Chantal de la Véronne (Paul Geuthner, 1961), 265.

⁵ Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 2:1180; Ronald Cueto, "1580 and All That: Philip II and the Politics of the Portuguese Succession," *Portuguese Studies* 8 (1992): 150–69.

⁶ "António, Prior of Crato," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., vol. 2. (1911).

"great help" to their common cause of deposing Philip II.⁷ The matter to which Ahmad al-Mansur referred was his recent invasion of the West African Songhai Empire.

Episode 3: The Invasion of the Songhai Empire (1591)

Thirteen years into the reign of Ahmad al-Mansur, Morocco was experiencing a degree of centralized rule emanating from the capital of Marrakech not seen since the Almohad dynasty. With the Portuguese decline and Spain's ongoing conflicts with both England and the Ottomans, any incentive to scrutinize Ahmad al-Mansur's moves was outweighed by more immediate and greater concerns. Ahmad al-Mansur could rest assured that the prospects of foreign encroachment were slim. Now was as good a time as any to begin expanding his empire. With an unnav-igable ocean to the west, Ottoman Empire to the east, Spanish to the north—the direction was southward toward the West African Songhai Empire.

Thanks to the writings of Ibn Battuta and, to a lesser extent, Leo Africanus, the stories of abundant salt and gold mines in the region had spread far and wide. The Songhai had been one of the largest empires on the African continent, having inherited the vestiges of Mansa Musa's reign from over two centuries earlier. For over five centuries, Islam had forged an integrated network of stakeholders between North and West Africa, and they were not keen on Ahmad al-Mansur's military plans.⁸ The most vehement opposition came from the elite of Fes, historically a rival imperial city to Marrakech, whose people had the means and motive to resist the sultan. To impede their opportunity, Ahmad al-Mansur looked to the burgeoning Atlantic for inspiration in pretext, policy, and purpose.

As the Atlantic became more and more accessible, maritime traffic in Moroccan ports skyrocketed, bringing along new encounters, goods, and ideas. Ahmad al-Mansur was no stranger to the Atlantic's growing importance in the sixteenth century. In the midst of constructing his lavish palace of Qasr al-Badī' in 1584, for example, Ahmad al-Mansur secured safe passage from Philip II for one of his architects to travel across the Atlantic and procure rare building material for the project.⁹ Toward the end of the sixteenth century, sugar was surging as one of the most coveted goods dominating the Atlantic—a largely Portuguese enterprise sourced from its plantation colony of Brazil. At this time, Portugal's only competitor in the global sugar market was none other than Sa'dian Morocco. While the palates of European elites acquired an insatiable sweet tooth, Morocco, like Portugal, quickly confronted the reality that sugar required an exceeding amount of strenuous labor. To secure that labor, Morocco, again like Portugal, turned to the same place and adopted the same approach: capturing and enslaving Black Africans. To contend with the elite of Fes, Ahmad al-Mansur handed out chests of gold, elevated positions, and the promise of greater commercial opportunity. Those who could not be swayed were forcibly conscripted into administrative positions and dispersed throughout the most remote regions; arrest

⁷ "Lettre de Moulay Ahmad al-Mansur à Élisabeth, 22 March 1592," in *Les sources inédites de l'histoire du Maroc: Archives et bibliothèques d'Espagne*, ser. 1, vol. 2, ed. Henry de Castries (Paul Geuthner, 1925), 69.

⁸ Even though Islamic jurisprudence, like most Abrahamic traditions, discouraged and limited Muslims from invading, capturing, and enslaving one another, the practical application of theological precepts was neither uniform nor consistent; see *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy (Markus Wiener Publishers, 2004); and John O. Hunwick, *West Africa, Islam, and the Arab World* (Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006).

⁹ "Lettre de Moulay Ahmad al-Mansur à Philippe II, 10 May 1584," in *Les sources inédites de l'histoire du Maroc: Archives et bibliothèques d'Espagne*, ser. 1, vol. 1, ed. Henry de Castries (E. Leroux, 1905), 436.

and execution were reserved for the absolutely unwavering.¹⁰ The threat of domestic resistance had been subdued, and on October 16, 1590, Ahmad al-Mansur deployed his forces in a grueling trek across the Sahara. By August 1591, Moroccan forces decimated the Songhai and established control over its imperial strongholds of Gao, Timbuktu, and Djenné.¹¹ Within a few years, first-hand accounts described the scenes of subjection (to borrow from Saidiya Hartman) that were proliferating throughout the Atlantic world of captive Black Africans forced into enslavement. In the final years of Ahmad al-Mansur's reign, sugar production in Morocco reached unprecedented heights. Before his death in 1603, he would acquire one final royal sobriquet to complete his epithet: Ahmad al-Mansur al-Dahabi, *Ahmad the Victorious, the Golden*.

Conclusion

For Fernand Braudel, the history of the early modern Mediterranean may have been the “Age of Philip II,” but not even he could ignore that Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur played an integral role in shaping that age. Ahmad al-Mansur strategically mastered the art of appearing neutral while covertly prolonging tensions by playing the Ottomans, Spanish, and English against one another. While they were preoccupied with the rotating cycle of battles, treaties, and scheming plots, Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur stabilized his internal authority and embarked on an ever-expanding empire-building project that extended Sa’dian territory from the southern shores of the Mediterranean, along Africa’s northern Atlantic coast, and into the Niger Delta. He reigned over a vital site of the early modern period that collapsed and contained within it a world forever unmade and remade by difference.

From the very beginning of his reign, on the heels of his victory in the Battle of Three Kings to his final years after invading the Songhai, Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur evaded all attempts to place Morocco under any sphere of influence. He fashioned sovereignty and the foundations of the modern Moroccan state by wielding the reality that Sa’dian Morocco was suspended between the ultimate determinations of difference. He did so by refracting imperial rivalries against one another through his own empire-building agenda. Morocco was simultaneously removed from and integrated with all the different worlds that enveloped Morocco’s frontiers—Islamic, Christian, European, African, Atlantic, and Mediterranean.

The seemingly liminal space that divides, delineates, limits, ends, and begins is also where meaning lies. “As thus separated,” Hegel tells us, “they are just as much essentially connected.”¹² In Arabic, the Maghrib is not named for its center, but for its dusk: “the land where the sun sets.” The history of Sa’dian Morocco is one that refuses the clarity of coherence and order. It demands

¹⁰ Mohammed al-Ifrānī, *Nozhet-elhādi*, ed. Mohammed Jādūr (Ministry of Culture, 2018); ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Fishtālī, *Manāhil al-ṣafā fi akhbār al-mulūk al-shurafā*, ed. ‘Abd al-Karīm Karīm (The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, 1973); *Majmū‘at thawahir wa rasa’il as-sa’diyyin*, ed. Mustafa Benalla (Association Al Hassan Al Wazzan pour la Connaissance Historique, 2011); Maymouna Snoussi, “Addawla assa’adiyya fi a’hd Ahmad al Mansur Eddahbi,” (PhD. dissertation, Université de Dr. Moulay Tahar, 2017); *Majmū‘at zahā’ir wa rasā’il alsa’diyyin*, ed. Mustafa Benalla (Rabat Net Maroc, 2011); Mohamed Hajji, *L’activité intellectuelle au Maroc à l’époque Sa’dide* (Dar El Maghrib, 1977); Anonymous, *Tarikh addawla assa’adiyya al-tagmadartiyya*, ed. Abderrahim Benhada (Dar tinmil lil tiba’a wa annashr, 1994).

¹¹ John O. Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa’di’s Tarikh Al-Sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents* (Brill, 2003).

¹² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 111 (§21.127).

a dialectical process of sublation in which we confront, name, and reveal the contradictions within. It is a history constituted not only by its limit but by the imperial logics that defined it as a limit. Like the namesake of the Atlas Mountains from which it sprang, historiography has cast the Sa’dian dynasty to the edges of the world not because it lacked importance, but because it carried too much. Yet it is there—underfoot and half-forgotten—where modernity would forge an enduring rampart of a world forever united in ontological and material difference. Perhaps, therefore, Atlas neither endured nor shrugged. Maybe he sublated. A