
The Sixteenth-Century World War and the Roots of the Modern World

A View from the Edge

Edmund Burke III

RETHINKING THE RECONQUISTA

On January 2, 1492, in a well-choreographed moment, Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad XII (or Boabdil, as he was known to the Spanish) presented the keys of the city to the representatives of Queen Isabella. With this gesture, the last independent Muslim kingdom in Spain came to an inglorious end. The fall of Granada marked a culminating phase in the Reconquista, the Christian religious struggle to subdue and expel Muslims and Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. Present at the scene was none other than Christopher Columbus, seeking to sew up a deal with Queen Isabella for a few ships.¹

Because a number of global, regional, and specifically Iberian processes all came together in this year, 1492 has long been thought to be a good date to begin a history of the modern world. Famously, Columbus made his first voyage to the Americas in 1492, stoutly maintaining all the while that he had reached Asia. Just ahead lay the establishment of the Spanish and Portuguese empires in the Americas, the "Great Dying" of Amerindian populations, and the discovery of silver (which in turn facilitated the participation of Europeans in the multipolar Asian-centered world economy).

As a date 1492 has additional important resonances. The Alhambra Decree of March 31, 1492, which ordained the expulsion of all Jews from Spain who had not converted to Catholicism, brought to an end a storied phase in Andalusian Jewish history. Those Jews who refused were compelled to leave Spain forever, eventually forming a diaspora that stretched around the globe. The fall of Granada accelerated a second diaspora, that of Andalusian Muslims. Many had already fled Spain by that time, more than one hundred

thousand more of them departed following the failed revolt of 1496. Other revolts would follow until the definitive expulsion of the Moriscos in 1621. Most went to the Maghrib, especially Morocco. With this double ethnic cleansing (and the inquisition that policed it), modern Spain was born.

This essay examines these world historical events from an unfamiliar perspective, that of sixteenth-century Morocco. It seeks to provide a new way of conceptualizing these empires, one that builds on recent work, while imagining them differently. As a key player in the struggle over the western Mediterranean, Morocco's neglected history has much to tell us about both the power and the limits of the military revolution of early modern times. Moreover, Morocco's success in withstanding Iberian efforts to extend the Reconquista to northwest Africa served to deflect the expansionary energies across the Atlantic and around Africa. More generally, Morocco provides a useful vantage point for thinking about the emergence of the international structures of power that defined the early modern world.

A review of the history of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Morocco sheds light on the connections between the ideological impulsion of early modern empires and the implacable logic of state building. Finally, it allows us to see the deep interconnections between the struggles in the African Atlantic and the Indian Ocean world, and how the sixteenth-century world war helped shape the early modern world of Afroeurasia.² To this end, I offer a Morocco-centric view of the early modern world and the place of the lands of Islam in this skein of connected histories.

But first we must expand our field of vision to the interactive geohistorical entity that some scholars have called the Hispano-Maghrib. Here the grinding of civilizational tectonic plates was matched by the struggle on the ground. Together with the Balkan-Anatolian fracture zone, the Hispano-Maghrib was one of the major contact zones in the many-sided struggle between Islam and Christendom.³ Both cultural frontiers were key sites for the deployment of gunpowder weapons in the greater Mediterranean region.⁴ In this regard the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by Mehmet I must be seen as a reciprocal of the surrender of Muslim Granada some fifty years later. Of course such cultural frontiers were also spaces through which goods, ideas, and peoples diffused.⁵

THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR FOR MOROCCO

To fully grasp the significance of the Iberian Reconquista, we must begin with Portugal and not Spain. By 1244 Portugal had completed its Reconquista and had established itself as an independent state. By 1400 Portuguese *marinheiros* (sailors) were fishing off the Grand Banks of Labrador

and had initiated the conquest of the Canary Islands (which was to take several centuries and the participation of multiple European armies). Thereafter they undertook a series of exploratory maritime voyages along the African coast.⁶ Unlike the geographically challenged Columbus, the Portuguese always knew where they were going. They had a strategic vision and growing confidence in their own maritime prowess. Thanks to information supplied by their Venetian allies, and the systematic observations of two spies—Pero da Covilha and Afonso da Paiva, who had been dispatched to the Indian Ocean world in the 1490s—Portuguese rulers had an extensive understanding of the Indian Ocean world, including its major ports, wind systems, and currents, even before Vasco da Gama arrived in Goa (1498).

Such accomplishments did not seem likely in 1244, when Portugal was an impoverished kingdom of one million people that faced two significant weaknesses: it lacked an adequate labor supply and its treasury lacked gold. So desperate was the latter situation that in 1383 the crown ceased minting gold coins and was only able to recommence fifty years later. Even then, a ruinous inflation drove the value of an ounce of gold from 50 *nouvelles* in 1409 to 250 in 1417, then to a staggering 700 in 1435.⁷ According to Portuguese historian Victorino Malgahaes Godinho, it was this basic fact that shaped the Portuguese decision to undertake the conquest of Morocco.⁸ Extending the Reconquista to Morocco made good business sense, at least for the Portuguese state. By playing on the hatred of the *moro* (Muslim), the crown gained access to papal funding as well as that of the Order of Christ, a leading crusading order.⁹

As a direct result of these initiatives, a Portuguese expedition conquered the Moroccan city of Ceuta (Arabic: Sibta) in 1415. Located on the Strait of Gibraltar, it was an important conduit of African gold to Europe. Since Morocco was a major shipment point for the trans-Saharan gold trade, and an important source of slaves to the labor-poor Portuguese economy, Morocco (an agriculturally wealthy society with significant mineral deposits and a large population) was an attractive prize. In the logic of empire, dispatching armies to Morocco, although enormously expensive, was viewed as necessary both to secure the Atlantic route to the gold fields of West Africa and to forestall the Ottomans from establishing themselves in northern Morocco.¹⁰

Over the period from 1415 to 1578, the struggle between the Portuguese and Moroccans went through a number of phases. By the early fifteenth century the Merinid dynasty (1215–1465) was on the wane, increasingly unable to control the social forces of the country. With the agricultural revenues of the state steadily undermined by the influx of pastoralist Arab groups from the Sahara, the Merinids' ability to resist was deeply compromised.

Their slow-motion collapse took almost a century to be accomplished. The Portuguese crown sought to conquer cities along the Atlantic coast—among them Qsar al-Sghir (1458), Tangier, and Arzila (1471)—from which emissaries endeavored to acquire trade goods of the interior through their Moroccan allies. Many Portuguese commanders, however, found raiding the Moroccan coast and pillaging the countryside to be more lucrative. Not surprisingly this strategy did not endear them to the locals. Portuguese *caval-gadas* (mounted regiments) enjoyed an initial advantage in their possession of gunpowder weapons, though their sheer rapacity was perhaps even more devastating. For a century and a half, they were able to enslave young Moroccan men and women and ship them around the empire (as well as to Portugal itself), where their labor was badly needed.¹¹

As the struggle in Morocco continued, so too did Portuguese exploratory expeditions along the West African coast. After rounding Cape Bojador in 1434, the way was opened to the West African coast. Soon the Portuguese gained a foothold on the Gold Coast, which gave them access to West African gold without having to obtain it in Morocco. By the mid-1470s, they were sending naval expeditions to Elmina and the Azores in an attempt to seize the Spanish gold fleet. By the 1480s they understood that Asia could be reached by sailing around Africa (though precisely how this could be done remained as yet unclear). One potentially awkward detail soon surfaced: to obtain African gold, it was necessary for the Portuguese to have trade goods acceptable to West African consumers. Only Moroccan goods would do, especially woven textiles (*baiks* and *hanbals*) and bronze vessels of various kinds. However, local Portuguese commanders had a vested interest in raiding and enslaving Moroccans. In this context one must situate the challenge posed by the Wattasids (1472–1554), another Berber dynasty. As the Wattasids grew stronger over the early sixteenth century, they sought to utilize the Portuguese threat by serving as its intermediaries, while simultaneously giving lip service to jihad.¹² Elsewhere in Morocco in this period, a series of regionally based and religiously motivated movements emerged, among them the Saadians, who remained a regional power until the mid-sixteenth century. Thus began what Weston F. Cook, Jr. has called “the Hundred Years’ War for Morocco.”¹³ It did not end until 1578.

THE RISE OF THE SAADIANS AS A GUNPOWDER EMPIRE

The Saadians originated in the fifteenth century in the Sous and Dra valleys in southern Morocco and claimed a sharifian lineage (descent from the Prophet

Mohammed). They sought to implant themselves in this region because it was distant from the main foci of Portuguese intervention. However, they soon came into conflict with Portuguese freebooters seeking to establish themselves in Agadir and along the southern Atlantic coast of Morocco, from where they sought access to the trans-Saharan gold caravans before they entered Morocco.¹⁴ At first, lacking access to gunpowder weapons, the Saadians did not do well. While they were able to project their force into central Morocco and briefly to Fez in the fifteenth century, the Saadians lacked the broad base of political support or the fiscal means to assemble an army capable of directly challenging either their Moroccan rivals (the Merinids and the Wattasids) or the Portuguese.¹⁵ In retrospect the early sixteenth century appears as a time of experimentation for the Saadians, as they learned the fiscal, political, and technological requirements of statecraft.

By the 1550s the Saadians recognized that they required gunpowder weapons (artillery especially) in order to contend with their rivals. They also began to develop the logistical organization and fiscal support that gunpowder weapons necessitated.

From their bases in the Sous, the Saadians exported grain; *baiks*, *hanbals*, and other woolen textiles; and brass and copper vessels to Africa. From their enclaves in the Atlantic plains, the Portuguese were also able to supply themselves with the same types of Moroccan goods. These they paid for with African slaves, and spices and textiles obtained in the Indian Ocean trade. Gradually the Saadians came to understand that they could disrupt the Portuguese strategy of trading Moroccan goods for African gold and slaves by intervening in the Saharan salt trade (a key commodity much desired by sub-Saharan Africans). By depriving the Portuguese of access to Moroccan goods and encouraging rivalries among Portuguese factions, the Saadians were able to weaken the Portuguese Indian Ocean empire.

In 1578 things came to a head. The Portuguese assembled a huge force under Prince Sebastian, the heir apparent to the throne. In alliance with one of the Wattasid rival princes, Abu Abdallah Muhammad II, the Portuguese sought to defeat Abd al-Malik, the other Wattasid ruler and Abu Abdallah’s bitter foe. At the Battle of the Three Kings (known to Moroccans as the Battle of Wadi al-Makhzan) all three princes perished. For the Portuguese it was a devastating defeat. Not only did the massive expenses of the war bankrupt the royal treasury, but the death of Prince Sebastian left the Portuguese without a direct heir. In the ensuing succession crisis, Spain was able to assert its claim to the throne and to control Portugal for the next sixty years (1580–1640).¹⁶ On the Moroccan side, the death of the two Wattasid rivals opened the way for the Saadian prince Ahmad al-Mansur (1578–1603)

to come to power.¹⁷ Although little known today, the Battle of Wadi al-Makhzan was a turning point in world history. It halted the Iberian Reconquista in its tracks while also discouraging the Ottomans from extending their power into Morocco from Algeria. Most importantly, it facilitated the consolidation of the Saadian state and the integration of Moroccan national territory.

How can we explain the Moroccan victory? Cook argues that it was the Saadian use of gunpowder weapons that secured their victory. Gunpowder weapons had been known in Morocco for more than a century by this time, but the Saadians were the first to fully capitalize on their deployment in battle. Far from being an isolated example, he suggests, the gunpowder revolution occurred in Morocco more or less simultaneously with the rest of Eurasia during the early fourteenth century. As a result Morocco must be viewed in its larger Hispano-Maghribi context.¹⁸

The Portuguese had been the first to take advantage of the new military technology. Following the expulsion of the last of the Muslims from their national territory, they attacked and seized port cities along the Atlantic coast, utilizing their initial superiority in gunpowder weapons. But their intervention provoked a Moroccan reaction, as rulers, tribes, and individuals all sought to acquire guns. In the ensuing phase, Moroccan civil society sought to resist the efforts of the Moroccan state to deploy its coercive power by firearms.

In 1591 Sultan al-Mansur sent a Moroccan expeditionary force armed with gunpowder weapons across the Sahara to Timbuktu to conquer the Songhai empire and thereby to win access to West African alluvial goldfields. African gold was thereafter used to fund the operations of the Saadian state. But the connection only lasted until 1612, when the Moroccans were compelled to withdraw. On the African side, the consequences of the Moroccan invasion were equally devastating.¹⁹

The collapse of the Saadian state in 1659 was caused by its inability to succeed in disarming traditional Moroccan military institutions. By refusing to take the stern measures required in naming a successor, the sultan allowed conditions to exist within which rivalries among the princes could flourish. The broken chain of command created an opening in which locally and regionally based forces, themselves also armed with gunpowder weapons, could emerge.²⁰

The complexities of the early seventeenth-century crisis that affected Morocco are too numerous to recount here in detail. Its general outlines conform to the impact of the global crisis of the seventeenth century across Afroeurasia, in which the onset of the Little Ice Age interacted with political developments in a complex fashion. Crucial in the Moroccan case was

the coincidence of a decade of civil war (1604–1614) and a prolonged famine (1604–1608). Together they made it impossible to support the central state army and facilitated the emergence of locally based forces armed with gunpowder weapons. At the height of the succession crisis of 1602, Morocco was also struck by a cholera pandemic. By 1629 the Saadian gunpowder empire had dissolved into a Moroccan gunpowder society.

THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY WORLD WAR AND THE ORIGINS³ OF THE MODERN WORLD

In world historical perspective, the Hundred Years' War for Morocco appears as the Hispano-Maghribi component of the sixteenth-century world war. It featured a global struggle between the Ottoman Empire and the Iberian powers (both Spain and Portugal) in the context of the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans and the Reconquista.²¹ Indeed, Morocco was but one in a series of interconnected cultural fault lines dividing Muslims and Christians.

The breadth and ambition of Ottoman interventions were extraordinary. In 1517, led by the corsair Khayr al-Din al-Uluj, an Ottoman fleet conquered Algiers. In the same year the Ottomans also seized control of Egypt from the Mamluks, thereby solidifying their legitimacy as the supreme Sunni rulers in the Islamic world and providing a new organizing principle for the empire. Over the next several decades, the Ottomans were able to intervene across northern Africa from the Moroccan frontier to Egypt and the Red Sea. In addition, the defeat of the Safavi Shiite ruler Ismail Shah at Chaldiran in 1511 temporarily removed the major Islamic imperial rival to the Ottomans and consolidated their position in Greater Syria and eastern Anatolia. Other fronts included central Europe (the Ottomans laid siege to Vienna in 1529), southern Russia and the Crimea, and East Africa (especially the Horn of Africa). Ultimately the Ottomans were able to project their power into the Indian Ocean as far as Aceh in northern Sumatra. Let us briefly consider each in turn.

Ottoman armies were on the march in the Balkans in the sixteenth century. They consolidated their control over Hungary, Serbia, and Greece in this period at the expense of the Habsburgs. In 1529 Ottoman armies under Sulayman laid siege to Vienna, only being defeated by "General Winter." The successive Balkan campaigns in the first half of the century struck terror into the hearts of central Europeans. Finally, the Ottoman navy, although beaten by a combined Habsburg fleet at Lepanto in 1571, was rebuilt the following year and retook all it had lost.²²

The Ottoman conquest of Egypt (1517) by Selim the Grim provided the empire with access to the grain and agricultural products of Egypt, adding considerably to the tax base. The conquest of Egypt also solidified Ottoman control over eastern Mediterranean trade and gave them an incentive to intervene in support of Muslim merchants in the Red Sea spice trade. Toward that end, Ottoman engineers began work on a Suez canal (but did not finish it) in 1584. How much did the conquest of Egypt matter? Whereas the silver of the Americas provided approximately 200,000–300,000 ducats per year till 1550 to Spain, historians have estimated that the tax revenues of Egypt provided a minimum of 400,000 ducats per year to the Ottomans—and this amount increased sharply thereafter.²³ Nor was that all.

Starting in the 1530s and intermittently until the end of the century, the Ottomans were allied with the Sunni Muslim states along the Coromandel Coast in India where Ottoman navies successfully operated on numerous occasions. Still more surprisingly, Ottoman fleets intervened on behalf of the Muslim ruler of Aceh in northern Sumatra against the Portuguese and their allies. The projection of Ottoman power into the southern seas is convincingly analyzed by Giancarlo Casale in *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*.²⁴ Given the distances involved, the Ottoman-Aceh alliance was inconclusive, but probably did permit Aceh to retain its independence. More to the point, as Casale shows, Ottoman involvement in the Muslim spice trade of the southern seas was highly profitable to the Ottoman state treasury—as well as to sticky-fingered commanders and officials with access to the goods.²⁵

Also in the 1530s and 1540s, and sporadically thereafter, the Ottomans intervened in the Ethiopian-Adal war in the Horn of Africa. The conflict pitted the Ethiopian Christian kingdom of the interior highlands against largely pastoralist Somalis under Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi. While the Portuguese sent military instructors, weapons, and money to support the Ethiopian cause, the Ottomans reciprocated by supporting the Somalis. In East Africa, these encounters ended in a stalemate. Neither party nor its local allies was able to displace the other.²⁶

Finally, the Ottoman intervention on behalf of the Muslim Turkish Krim Tatar kingdom that ruled the Crimea and the northern part of the Black Sea proved decisive. In the sixteenth century, the Krim Tatars were engaged in a protracted struggle against the Don River Cossacks (the sometime allies of the tsarist Russian state in Moscow). In 1570 Ottoman strategists boldly conceived a plan to attack their Shiite Safavi Persian enemies from the rear by constructing a canal linking the Don and Volga Rivers. This would have enabled them to sail from the Black Sea via the Sea of Azov to the Caspian Sea. In the end, the Don-Volga canal was never built, but the plan reveals the extent of Ottoman ambitions.

CONCLUSION: CULTURAL INVOLUTION AND THE CRISIS OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Global international history dates from the sixteenth-century collision of Iberian and Ottoman empires all around a series of interconnected fault lines that span from Morocco in the western Mediterranean to Aceh at the northern tip of Sumatra to the east, and from the Volga-Don frontier to the north and down the Swahili coast of East Africa to the south. The sixteenth-century world war created an interactive space in which the local roots of politics were linked to globe-spanning initiatives, though not always in ways their architects imagined. The ability of states to devise durable fiscal and trade systems to fund warfare increasingly determined the outcomes of particular struggles and led to the winnowing of less adroit competitors. But the fiscal component of the fiscal/military revolution was not the only element driving events. Windows of opportunity opened and closed without warning. Governmental elites, military classes, and merchants were well advised to pay close attention, or miss their main chance. Peasants, artisans, and tribespersons were no less affected by the shifting political and economic currents. I have already described the complex and multivectoral changes that confronted Moroccans, although not all of them and not to the same degree. To comprehend the denouement of the Saadian regime, it is necessary to get a sense of the specific challenges it confronted, as well as the extent to which those changes reflected the larger forces at work in Afroeurasia.

One hemisphere-wide factor played an important role in the denouement of the Saadian empire: the onset of the Little Ice Age. Faruk Tabak's recent *The Waning of the Mediterranean* attempts to chart changing temperature and precipitation patterns around the Inner Sea.²⁷ Sam White provides further details on its impact on the Ottoman Empire.²⁸ In Morocco, the Little Ice Age meant rainier, colder weather; lower agricultural yields; and a shorter growing season. It appears to have accelerated the movement of Arabic-speaking pastoralists from the Sahara into central Morocco, and to have weakened the ability of agriculturalists to defend themselves. It also played a role in the numerous famines and epidemics that decimated the Moroccan population in the seventeenth century. These developments compromised the ability of the Saadian state to control pastoralist incursions into Morocco.²⁹

Following the death of Ahmad al-Mansur in 1603, the Saadians lost control of Timbuktu, setting off a slow-motion crisis that left the state politically fragmented. Thereafter the Saadians became one regional kingdom among several. The Alawis of Sijilmasa (1659–present) were one notable rival of this era; they gradually asserted their control over all of Morocco. The interplay of climate, disease, and social factors in the seventeenth century

brought about a prolonged crisis in Morocco, as it did across the "Mediterranean to the Indies" zone.³⁰

The outcome of the sixteenth-century world war was basically a stalemate. It permitted Ottoman rulers to consolidate their regional dominance over much of the Mediterranean, eastern Europe, and Arab Southwest Asia. Although Portuguese merchants made important initial inroads in the spice trade, by 1550 the Red Sea spice trade returned to previous levels, and (thanks to their Indian Ocean allies) the Ottomans were able to attract more than 40 percent of it through their domains. On another level, the sixteenth-century world war created the frontiers of the world as they were on the eve of modernity and the move to the fossil-fuel energy regime. The frontiers provided a stable framework for the conduct of international politics for the next several centuries. The struggle between Christianity and Islam was encoded into the DNA of the emerging international system. It was not the only deeply laid source of division, but in a postnationalist world increasingly divided by extremes of wealth and poverty, it has proved to be one of the longest lasting.³¹

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Perspectives on the Global Past

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