

Ahmad Al-Mansour.

The Beginning of Modern Morocco.

Mercedes García-Arenal. OneWorld Publishers, 2012.

The well-known Orientalist Bernard Lewis (The Muslim Discovery of Europe, London, 1982, p. 118) described early modern Morocco in the following terms: 'In the world of Islam, Morocco, in Arabie called al-Maghrib al-Aqsà, the Far West, was a remote and isolated outpost and a comparatively small and weak country at that.' Morocco was remote from the main power centres of the Middle East, and remains remote to the interests of most scholars of the Islamic world today. However, during the age of Sultan Muley Ahmad al-Mansur, Morocco was neither small nor weak not at least in the mind of the sultan himself, nor in the opinions of the Ottoman sultan Murat III, Queen Elizabeth I of England, Philip II of Spain or the Dutch *stadhouder*. During the course of a reign that lasted almost a quarter of a century (1578-1603), Ahmad al-Mansur brought Morocco to the forefront of international politics and subjected it to a process of modernization, to bring it up-to-date with Ottoman Turkey and with Europe. Morocco's commercial and economic success under al-Mansur did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries abroad. Thus, the Spanish Duke of Medinasidonia (who was to lead the Armada to defeat against the English in 1588), a leading expert in Moroccan affairs, wrote to Philip II in 1584: 'Barbary is no longer what it was, for in it are wealth and curiosity.' Wealth and curiosity were important traits found in Ahmad al-Mansur himself. To these one might add ambition: his most grandiose aim was to become an emperor after the fashion of Philip of Spain or the Ottoman Murat. Ahmad al-Mansur presided over the beginnings of modern Morocco, and thus finds his place in the series *Makers of the Musli World*.

Lewis's 'remote and isolated outpost' evokes Morocco as a country closed in upon itself, impenetrable to Europeans (until the period of French and Spanish colonization), impermeable to its northern neighbours and cut off from its neighbours to the east. Whatever the reality of Morocco's isolation today, if it is still perceived as

remote, hindsight provides us with a very different view.

In fact, the Morocco of Muley Ahmad al-Mansur was very much connected with the world of its time and that is what being 'modern' means. It partook in international politics and diplomacy, in trade, in conquest and in discovery. As an example, we can choose a single year: in 1593, in the middle of al-Mansur's reign, an embassy from the Western Sudan brought an elephant to Marrakesh that made a tremendous impression on the population of the city. Its impact was similar to that caused by Hanno, the white elephant brought from India to Rome a few decades earlier as a gift to Pope Leo X from the King of Portugal, Don Manuel. The possession of exotic animals was a sign of the greatness of emperors, an emblem of their influence over remote regions where exotic animals roamed wild. Not so long before, Ahmad al-Mansur had asked Philip II to send him an artist to paint his portrait, another sign of royalty. In the same city of Marrakesh that year of 1593, legal scholars argued whether the new substance known as tobacco was apt for legitimate consumption or was unlawful. The new royal palace, al-Badi', was being built by the Sultan, for which he had brought the best foreign architects and artisans to Marrakesh. The marble for the palace was imported from Italy. This marble had been bought with Moroccan sugar, weight for weight. Moroccan sugar was so superior that Queen Elizabeth of England refused to use any other in her household. In 1589, Queen Elizabeth consumed 18,000 pounds of sugar, paid for at 14 pence a pound. Ahmad al-Mansur proposed a joint venture to the English Queen to conquer the Spanish territories in America. His plan was not very different from the one proposed ten years earlier by Francis Drake for the conquest of Peru, a plan that forced the Spaniards - well informed by their spies to fortify the port of Callao on the Pacific coast. In 1591, Ahmad al-Mansur launched an expedition across the Sahara to conquer the Songhay kingdom of Gao and Timbuktu to search for sources of gold, much like the Spanish conquistadors, or Sir Walter Raleigh in his search for El Dorado. There is no question that Muley Ahmad al-Mansur was very much a ruler of his time.

Morocco's physical location between three great regions of communication and trade, the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea and the Saharan desert, and its political location between the dominant powers of the sixteenth century the Spanish Habsburgs and the Ottoman Turks made it a country of great strategic

importance. Morocco also represented a frontier territory between Europe and the Islamic World. It was a borderland that absorbed peoples expelled from the Iberian Peninsula, such as the Jews and Muslims of Granada, and integrated them as technicians, merchants and consultants to the administration. It was a country that sought to imitate the political powers it admired the Ottoman, Spanish and British Empires and to borrow from them elements that the sultan believed had brought about the wealth and power of those nations. Morocco was a country that played a leading role in the international politics of the sixteenth century, forming alliances with Christian nations when faced with rivals at home or the threat of force from other Islamic powers.

In the rivalry between Turks and Spaniards for control of the Mediterranean, Morocco played a fundamental role: Ahmad al-Mansur learned how to bend the rivalry to his advantage. He also learned how to profit from the division between Catholic and Protestant Europe, a division that gave Ahmad al-Mansur room to manoeuvre. While it is true that events external to Morocco contributed greatly to his importance in international politics, al-Mansur saw how to make weaknesses opportunities.

The country's main sources of weakness were the Iberian colonies on Moroccan soil, established in the late fifteenth century. At that time, Spain and Portugal had divided up the world between them, and Morocco was subjected to what might be described as an extension of the peninsular process of the so-called *Reconquista*. Thus, Mediterranean ports such as Melilla fell under Spanish control, as did Tlemcen for a time, and most importantly Oran, on Morocco's eastern border. During the fifteenth century, the Portuguese succeeded in conquering most of Morocco's Atlantic ports, from Tangier and Ceuta, down the coast to Agadir, making access to the sea impossible for the Moroccans themselves, who were reduced to using a handful of small ports: Rabat-Salé, Larache and Tetouan. Although by the second half of the sixteenth century all ports down the Atlantic coast except Mazagan / al-Jadida had been lost or evacuated by the Portuguese, Morocco still found it difficult to participate in international trade and was prevented from having its own navy. Instead, the Moroccan-controlled ports of the Atlantic coast became much-feared centres of operations against

Spanish ships sailing out to the East and West Indies or returning to Europe with rich cargoes of spices, silks or precious metals. Pirates of all nationalities created shelters and supply havens on the Moroccan coast, and as a result Spain developed an interest in creating its own points of support in the region.

Despite the process of almost colonial advance or perhaps precisely because of it - Ahmad al-Mansur's ambition was to achieve supremacy over the lands of Islam to which he felt he was more entitled than the Ottoman sultan. He wanted symbolic as well as political power. Thus, he undertook a series of reforms in his public administration and the armed forces to set about building an empire of his own. His army crossed the Sahara to conquer the Western Sudan. At the same time, he entertained hopes that Elizabeth I would allow him to assist her in a conquest of the Spanish American territories or southern Spain, or alternatively that an alliance with Spain might permit him to wrest the regencies of Algiers and Tunis from Ottoman control. Al-Mansur also undertook sophisticated propaganda campaigns and established an elaborate court ceremonial. As part of the same programme, he built up a monumental capital, Marrakesh, that served as a stage for the projection of his absolute, universalizing dominance to his own subjects, to Muslims in general and to Europeans.

Vis-à-vis his subjects, Ahmad al-Mansur felt entitled to his position, as he was a *sharif*, or descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. That is what his title Muley ('my lord') means. His membership of the holiest of all lineages conferred upon him the kind of charisma and religious authority that legitimized his possession of absolute political power. In the eyes both of his own subjects and of foreign observers, his authority was confirmed by his near-miraculous and completely unexpected rise to power in 1578 as a result of the battle of Alcazar. In it, he won a resounding victory over the army of King Don Sebastian of Portugal, who had launched a military expedition to conquer Morocco hence his title Al-Mansur, 'The Victorious'.

The young Portuguese king, who had no heirs, died during the battle. It was a catastrophic venture for Portugal, which lost its independence as a result. Philip II of Spain, son of a Portuguese princess, inherited the throne of Portugal and united both crowns under his command, in the so-called 'Iberian union'. The battle of Alcazar,

described by historian Fernand Braudel as 'Mediterranean Christianity's last Crusade', was an event that also produced consternation in England, France and Holland.

It is thanks to this battle that Ahmad made his first appearance in the historical record, and it is only then that his biography can truly begin or rather only then that the sources give us the first scraps with which a biography can be constructed. It was this battle that made Europeans become aware of the existence of a man called Muley Ahmad al-Mansur.