

Sayyida al-Hurra: A Forgotten North African Queen and Military Leader

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Abstract. This study examines a largely forgotten sixteenth-century North African queen, Sayyida al-Hurra. During a critical period when Morocco was suffering from political fragmentation and attacks by the Portuguese and Spanish, al-Hurra emerged as a well-trained and respected governor and military leader. This study employed a historical and ethnographic approach, drawing data from a variety of primary and secondary local Moroccan sources, including secondary Arabic literature, interviews with historians, and visits to historical sites. According to the findings, factors that helped al-Hurra be an exceptional leader for over three decades included her respected lineage, her family's leadership in the region, her education, intelligence, flexibility, fluency in multiple languages, skill in naval warfare, and a strong personality. Both of her marriages also served the political goal of bringing stability to northern Morocco.

Keywords: Leadership, Morocco, women, Islam, history

1 Introduction

Various women have held political power in Islamic countries throughout history (Al-'afia 1978). One such figure is Sayyida al-Hurra, a sixteenth-century Moroccan queen of Andalusí descent who successfully ruled the city of Tétouan for over three decades (c. 1510-1542 CE) during a turbulent time for the region (Hakim 1983). *Sayyida* is the feminine form of *sayyid*, meaning “master” (Mernissi 2000, 15), “lord, chief, head and leader” (Baalbaki 2001, 653). Another title given to Muslim women with power is *hurra*, indicating freedom and independence (Baalbaki 2001). Despite their importance, however, these women are often forgotten or relegated to historical footnotes. This is especially the case with al-Hurra. In an interview, the local historian Ali Risouni stated that relatively little was known about al-Hurra, as Arab historians were not interested in writing about her during her own time, although she has continued to be known in her home city. In contrast, foreign scholars have long been fascinated by al-Hurra and her politics (Al-'afia 1978). In another interview, the historian, Fatima Bouchmal, blamed this on society not traditionally celebrating women who hold leadership positions. To help address the lack of information on this figure, especially in English, this study examined al-Hurra's background, impact on northern Morocco, and key factors that contributed to her success. By synthesizing the available Arabic literature with insights from local historians, this work seeks to increase the understanding of this historical figure and bring her to the attention of a wider audience.

Adopting a historical and ethnographic approach, the study drew data from three sources: Arabic secondary texts that are often not available in English, interviews with local Moroccan scholars, and fieldwork by visiting *qasbah* (fortress). The Arabic materials largely complemented each other. 'Omrani (2015), for instance, gives insights into the importance of sharifian nobility, Hakim (1983) gives a short biography about al-Hurra's birth and family, and Daoud (1959) goes over the history of Tétouan, briefly mentioning al-Hurra's tenure as governor, while Abrzaaq (2016) provides information on al-Hurra's influence over piracy and naval warfare. Bouchmal (2020) gave a quick report about the geography and history of Chefchaouen. Bouchmal (2016) also gave a summary about al-Hurra's home city and factors that caused the city's fall. In this article, Bouchmal briefly talked about al-Hurra and her role in strengthening international relations with Ottomans. Alouh (1967) talked about Moroccan princesses who took part in maintaining the Moroccan throne and al-Hurra was one of those princesses.

The interviews were conducted with the two main historians of al-Hurra's city, Ali Risouni and Fatima Bouchmal, as well as Mohammed ben Saaid, who

ran the museum that was built in al-Hurra's father *qasbah* (fortress). Resouni was a researcher in the history of Chefchaouen, including its emirs (princes) and Arabic and Islamic identities. Bouchmal was formerly in charge of preserving the *qasbah* and had been the director of the cultural center in Chefchaouen. At the time of the interview, she was a professor of history, heritage, and monuments in Beni Mellal, Morocco. She had been studying the history and culture of Chefchaouen for 20 years, researching its history from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. Both historians speak Spanish and have access to Spanish sources about al-Hurra. The interview was an opportunity to get responses to complex questions that have never been addressed such as "why al-Hurra's history is not known." Ben Saaid was a technician in the cultural center in Chefchaouen and in charge of the *qasbah* museum.

The fieldwork consisted of visiting al-Hurra's grave, the *zawiya* (an institution or structure associated with Muslim Sufis) where she once lived, and a museum located in the *qasbah* where her father ruled, now a historical site. The signs available at the museum give insights into al-Hurra's status and highlight factors that helped her as a successful leader. Sources are very rare and hard to obtain from libraries in Morocco. Many sources I used in this research were not available at libraries and there was no printed edition I could buy. The only solution was to travel to al-Hurra's home city and ask historians who studied the history of the city for a copy of their sources.

2 Findings

According to the primary and secondary data, many factors contributed to al-Hurra's success as a ruler, including her noble lineage, her family's status, the political role her father played in Morocco, her education, the political environment (according to the interviews with Risouni and Bouchmal), and her own intelligence and personality (Al-'afia 1978).

2.1 Al-Hurra's Lineage, Family, and Upbringing

Although an extraordinary figure, al-Hurra was greatly shaped by her environment. Northern Morocco has a complex and rich history, occupying a strategic location and having human and natural resources (Abrzaaq 2016), long making it a target of foreign powers. The first half of the sixteenth century was an important period that would shape modern Morocco with the fall of the Wattasid ruling family, the rise of the Saadi rulers, and Spanish and Portuguese attacks along the Moroccan coast (Al-'afia 1978; Alouh 1967; 'Omrani 2015). Morocco, during this time, suffered intense pressure from these internal and external power struggles, as governments were overthrown and, as the histo-



Figure 1. Picture taken by the researcher of a display in the qasbah museum. It states that Portugal took two northern Moroccan cities, Tangier and Asilah, in 1471, after which Moulay Ali ben Rashid declared war and built the qasbah to protect the city, which grew from an influx of Muslim and Jewish refugees.

According to an interview with Mohammed ben Saaid, the museum curator, al-Hurra's father built this fortress in a mountainous area far from the sea because the Portuguese were attacking and occupying cities close to the sea, making the fortress harder for the invaders to access.

After the fall of Granada, a large number of Muslims and Jews fled from Spain and settled in this area (see Figures 1–3). Led by Ali Al-Mandri, a Moroccan of Andalusian origin, they rebuilt the city, Tétouan, in 1483-1484, and it

rian Risouni noted in the interview, the Portuguese occupied the Moroccan cities of Tangier, Asilah, and Ksar es-Seghir in 1471. Born in northern Morocco around 1440, al-Hurra's father, *Moulay* (Prince) Ali ben Rashid, was the governor of the northwestern Moroccan city of Chefchaouen (Hakim 1983), which as Risouni noted in the interview, he founded in 1471 to defend Morocco against the Portuguese.

Al-Hurra's father was of sharif descent and one of the grandchildren of Moulay Abdsalam ben Mshish (Bouchmal 2016). Sharif here refers to the elite or nobles who traced their ancestry to the Prophet Muhammed ('Omrani 2015). Ben Rashid moved to Granada in 1460 when it was still under Muslim control and joined the palace of Muhamed Sarir, the last Granada prince, to learn military skills. There he married a young Andalusian woman from the town of Vejer de la Frontera. Born in Cadis, al-Hurra's mother converted to Islam after her marriage, and was renamed Lala Zahra. After the fall of Granada, al-Hurra's father returned to Chefchaouen and became the prince of war in northern Morocco due to his skills in the mountains and Andalusian field ('Omrani 2015). He built a qasbah to defend the region against Portuguese invaders and served as the governor of Chefchaouen. This qasbah is now a museum.



Figure 2: Picture taken by the researcher inside the qasbah museum in the summer of 2022.

acted as a quasi-independent state (Daoud 1959). An alliance of emirates, including Chefchaouen and Tétouan, formed to face the Iberian threat from the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts due to the waning power of the Wattasid rulers, whose authority in Morocco was largely limited to Fez, the capital in the era of Ahmad al-Wattasi (1549-1524). After failing to rule independently, Ali ben Rashid and Al-Mandri represented the Wattasid king in the North. Ali ben Rashid died in 1516 CE.

In the midst of the social and political upheaval of this period, al-Hurra was born sometime around 1495 CE, the exact year of her birth being unknown (Hakim 1983), and was raised in Chefchaouen, a rich intellectual and political environment (Abrzaaq 2016; Al-'afia 1978; Daoud 1959). The lineage and political authority of her family helped her acquire leadership and cultural skills that would be indispensable in the political scene in the North. Al-Hurra was trained and received a strong education from well-known scholars (Alouh 1967). For instance, Risouni noted in the interview that she received instruction from Abdallah al-Ghazwani, a prominent Sufi scholar and saint, and that al-Hurra herself was a Sufi. He also noted that her uncle was Fernando Martín, for which the city of Martil was named. In another interview, Bouchmal noted that al-Hurra



Figure 3: Picture taken by the researcher outside the qasbah museum in June 2022. A sign states that the fortress was built by Moulay Ali Ben Rashid, the founder of Chefchaouen, in 1471.

ra's father "brought her one of the most important scholars in the region, who educated her in law, religion, and Arabic in addition to her excellent skills in Spanish and Portuguese." Bouchmal mentioned that this education extended to military matters as well. As a result, al-Hurra was very knowledgeable and forged her own vision for her people's future (Alouh 1967).

Regarding her family life, Bouchmal stated that al-Hurra "was spoiled by her oldest brother, Moulay Ibrahim. She also had a half brother and sister," although nothing is known of her sister. Despite this promising background, Bouchmal stated that al-Hurra's real rise to power began with marriage. Both of her marriages helped her acquire authority and gradually take the reins of leadership. It was highly uncommon for women to have formal positions of power in Morocco (Daoud 1959), but al-Hurra's remarkable skills facilitated her rule politically, socially, and militarily (Daoud 1959, 119).

2.2 First Marriage and Rise to Power

Al-Hurra married her first husband, Moulay Ali Al-Mandri, who was the governor of Tétouan (1504-1519), in 1510 (Bouchmal, 2016). The purpose of this marriage was twofold: to strengthen the ties between the two main ruling families in the North and to have a reliable ally in their war against the Portuguese (Al-'afia 1978; Bouchmal 2016). As the qasbah museum curator noted in the interview, Al-Mandri “married her as she was of sharif origin and to guarantee people’s loyalty and her tribe’s loyalty as well.” While waging war against Iberian forces, her husband was often in the field, away from their qasbah, and left al-Hurra in charge in his absence. He also tasked her with addressing certain issues as she was known for her ability to manage problems (Daoud 1959, 119). In this way, her marriage and work in her husband’s stead brought political stability to the North (Alouh 1967; Daoud 1959). During this time, she learned naval skills, as the Al-Mandri control of the North was partially based on their naval power. Their ships were led by skilled sailors, especially Andalusí immigrants, which made them a greater threat to Spanish and Portuguese ships.

After al-Hurra’s first husband died in 1519, her brother Moulay Ibrahim ben Rashid appointed her as governor of Tétouan. She proved to be skilled in political matters, the power dynamics at play in the Mediterranean, and managing the city’s affairs. The people of Tétouan accepted her leadership, as they were accustomed to her running things when her first husband was away and she had shown herself to be a competent ruler. This is notable since the people of Tétouan could have backed Al-Mandri’s brother over her, as he was competing with her and wanted to take over after the death of his brother.

2.3 Al-Hurra’s Active Role as a Governor and Military Leader

During al-Hurra’s three decades in power, the qasbah was the center of her government, and housing, for example, the treasury and prison. From this fortress, she was also in charge of supervising military operations and protecting the city, making major decisions with the assistance of advisers such as her brother, Ibrahim ben Rashid, who was a minister of Sultan al-Wattasi in Fez (Abrzaaq 2016).

Despite drawing authority originally from her husband and brother, al-Hurra had distinct policies of her own. She collaborated with the Ottoman corsair Barbarossa, allowing his ships to stop at Moroccan ports. The purpose of this was to gain a powerful ally against the Iberian threat. She also offered them a market for their economic gains from piracy (Abrzaaq 2016; Boushamal 2016). As Risouni noted in the interview, the Ottomans at the time were protecting Algeria from Spain.

Al-Hurra was celebrated in her country as a hero who defended the North from foreign threats. For example, Figure 4 shows a picture taken in the qasbah museum that calls her a “princess of jihad”; in contrast, she was often called a “pirate queen” in Europe. Abrzaaq (2016) discussed the differing views of piracy among Christian and Muslim countries at the time. Muslim countries viewed employing pirates to attack European ships and cities as a way to respond to the forced expulsion of Andalusí Muslims when the Spanish conquered Granada. In this way, piracy was seen as part of a religious obligation, based on precepts from the Quran, to protect Muslim lands. In contrast, European countries took a less positive view of these activities.

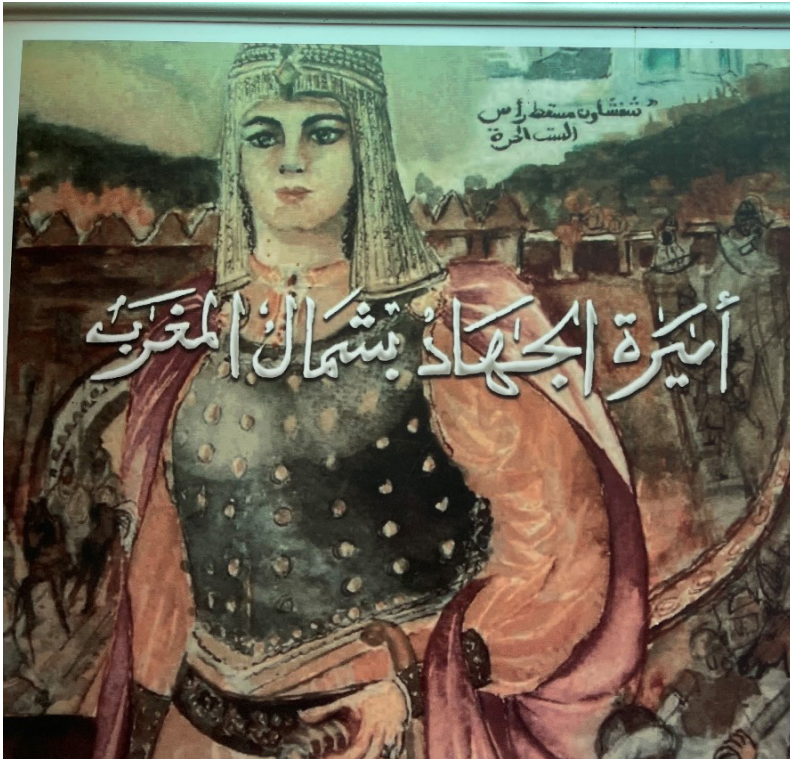


Figure 4: An artist's depiction of al-Hurra as a “princess of jihad” in northern Morocco.

Geography, naval power, piracy, and naval trade all played a crucial role in Moroccan foreign relations during this time. Given the strategic importance of the Strait of Gibraltar linking the Mediterranean Sea with the Atlantic Ocean, Spain and Portugal sought to capture cities along the northern coast of Morocco. As a result, al-Hurra was forced to protect her territory and prevent the Europeans from seizing it. To accomplish this goal, she engaged in defensive as well as offensive campaigns. Her personal forces and those sponsored by her thus attacked numerous European ships and cities, taking ships, cargo, and thousands of prisoners (Daoud 1959), which she used to enrich the economy, strengthen the country, and pursue her interests, such as by selling European captives into slavery or ransoming them back to their countries of origin. As Risouni noted in the interview, she attacked Gibraltar, for example. For this reason, the number of prisoners Morocco took greatly increased during her reign. As a notable example, in 1528, her ships captured Portundo, a Portuguese who was called the prince of the sea. In this way, piracy gave al-Hurra revenue as well as a means to strengthen diplomatic relationships with foreign countries (Bouchmal 2016). In 1541, the Spanish priest, Contreras, came to Tétouan to free Spaniards in Al-Hurra's prison. Al-Hurra agreed to free 340 prisoners in return for a ransom of 3,000 riyals (Hakim 1983). The number of prisoners taken throughout the years is shown in Table 1, taken from Abrzaaq (2016, 303) and translated from Arabic into English.

Table1: Number and Year of Prisoners under Al-Hurra

Spoils	Nationality of spoils	Number of ships coming to Tétouan's port	Year
150 prisoners and 8 ships	Portuguese	8	1527
	Ottoman	22 or 26 then 16	1531
	Ottoman	30	1531
	Ottoman-Tétouani	A group	1531
	Tétouani	25	1536
80 women and children	Tétouani	4 or 5	1540
A Portuguese Ship	Ottoman	1	1541

Clearly aware of the importance of naval warfare, al-Hurra expanded the fleet she inherited from her husband by increasing the number of vessels and sailors and building a shipyard (Al-fkiki 1996). Because of her strong trade and diplomatic relations with the Ottomans, they used her port as a base from which to attack Iberian ships starting in 1530. For this reason, the number of Ottoman ships gradually increased in Tétouan (Abrzaaq 2016). Although the Portuguese occupied many northern Moroccan cities, they never conquered Tétouan (Daoud 1959). Al-Hurra's fleet operated freely throughout the western Mediterranean and eastern Atlantic, representing a major threat to Iberian trade and occupation of parts of northern Morocco. This type of asymmetrical warfare shaped her foreign relations, especially with the Portuguese and the governors of occupied cities. According to Mernissi (2000), "Spanish and Portuguese sources" mentioned that she "was their partner in the diplomatic game," and Mernissi described her as "the undisputed leader of the pirates in the western Mediterranean" (18). Her oldest brother, Ibrahim bin Ali bin Rashid, who ruled Chefchaouen after the death of her father and who was a minister and adviser of the Sultan, had a different vision for dealing with the Portuguese. He was against war and signed many agreements with them, including an armistice with the governor of Ceuta in 1538. Because of the importance of naval warfare and piracy in defending and enriching her city, al-Hurra asked her brother that Tétouan and Larache not be included in this agreement (Hakim 1983).

Al-Hurra likewise commanded her forces on land. For example, she was involved in the battles led by Sultan al-Wattasi against occupied Moroccan cities, such as helping lay siege to occupied Asilah in 1512, attacks that Tétouani forces led against Ceuta in 1528, and the attack on Asilah in 1528 (Abrzaaq 2016; Hakim 1983). Hakim (1983) mentioned that in Portuguese Foreign sources al-Hurra was involved in foreign diplomacy. Bouchmal (2016) mentioned that when Islam in Morocco was facing serious threats, warfare and the sharifian nobility played a major role in overcoming tribalism, unifying the people, and protecting the country.

2.4 Second Marriage and Downfall

Al-Hurra married her second husband, Sultan Ahmad al-Wattasi (1524-1549), in 1541. Instead of giving up her role and going to live with him in the capital, Fez, she had him come to her for the marriage, after which she stayed in her city and he returned to Fez (Daoud 1959). This was remarkable as it was the first time in Moroccan history that a sultan married far from the capital. As Bouchmal explained in the interview, "It is the norm that the sultan does not go anywhere to marry a woman; the woman or princess is brought to him. This

tells us about the status of her family.” The power of the Wattasid rulers was deteriorating, with their control limited largely to the capital, and they were unable to fight the Iberian threat in the North. This was thus a political marriage to strengthen al-Wattasi’s rule and extend his power by marrying the strongest leader in the North. The sultan leaving the capital to propose to al-Hurra showed her status as a political leader and a prominent figure in efforts to stabilize the country. After this marriage, al-Hurra started representing her husband in the North (Abrzaaq 2016; Hakim 1983). Her oldest brother, Moulay Ibrahim ben Rashid, was also married to the sultan’s sister, Aisha. According to Hakim (1983), after her marriage, al-Hurra had absolute authority. Bouchmal mentioned in the interview that al-Hurra’s marriage gave her more power as “She started forming allies with the Turks [Ottomans]. She made important gains. The Wattasid government needed this defense against Portuguese and Spanish forces.” In other words, her importance to the sultan gave her a certain leeway in foreign affairs.

This marriage failed, however, to save the sultan’s reign (Abrzaaq 2016; Daoud 1959). In 1549, the Saadi family, based in Marrakech in southern Morocco, took control of Fez and overthrew the Wattasids. Since al-Hurra had become part of the Wattasi family, this rebellion was a threat to her reign as well. Her first husband’s family rebelled against the Wattasids in support of the Saadis in 1542. Her youngest brother, Mohammed ben Rashid (Emir of Chefchaouen), also joined the Saadis in rebelling against her and the Wattasids. Her main supporter, her older brother Moulay Ibrahim ben Rashid, had died in 1539. After her brother’s death, she would not find the same level of support from her half-brother Sidi Mohamed as Emir of Chefchaouen, who wanted to add Tétouan to his emirate (Hakim 1983).

Another challenge that came with her marriage was the conflict between al-Hurra’s desire to fight the Portuguese and her husband’s desire to improve relations with them (Hakim 1983). She did not heed his advice on this matter, which made her position more tenuous. The Saadi rebellion necessitated greater flexibility with Portugal so that the Wattasids would not have to fight the Saadis in the South while also fighting the Portuguese in the North. After al-Hurra launched a war against a Portuguese governor and her younger brother turned against her, she became isolated. Subsequently, her first husband’s family, the Al-Mandris, defeated her, took all her belongings, and forced her to return to her home city of Chefchaouen, where she lived out the remainder of her life and was buried (Al-’afia 1978; Hakim 1983). In the qasbah museum, a sign by the historian Bouchmal claims that her fleet’s readiness for war against Portugal and receiving Ottoman ships led her opponents to plan to overthrow her. Bouchmal

also noted that this was a consequence of a shift in power across the country:

As the Wattasid government fell, it meant the fall of all its government representatives, wherever they were, whether they were in Chefchaouen or other cities...All of them would fall as the Saadis' power had expanded from the South and aimed at unifying Morocco under the Saadi government and ending small emirates.

In his interview, Risouni said that al-Harra did not have any child and so left no descendants. At the time of the interview, Risouni was living in the house where al-Hurra lived after her defeat (see Figures 5 and 6). The house is now considered to be a *zawiya*, an institution or structure associated with Muslim Sufis. These structures serve a variety of purposes, including offering a place for worship, religious gatherings, and education (Berriane 2015; Burke 1969). As such, they play a strong religious, social, and cultural role, with a type of *zawiya* called the *tijaniyyah* connecting Morocco with its African neighbors (Berriane 2015). Historically, *zawiyas* often double as mausoleums, housing the remains of saints, and since al-Hurra's tomb is in a *zawiya*, she may be seen as a saint in this respect.

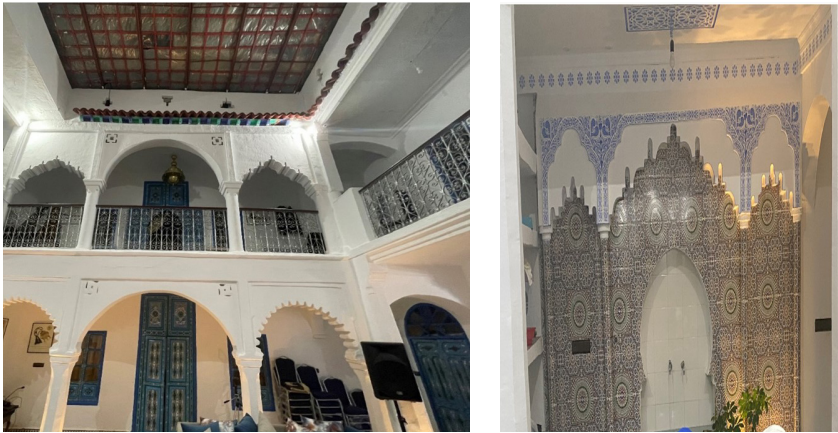


Figure 5: Photographs taken by the researcher of the house where al-Hurra lived after she was deposed.



Figure 6: Interior photographs taken by the researcher of the zawiya connected to al-Hurra's house.

2.5 How al-Hurra Is Remembered Today

The qasbah built by al-Hurra's father is today the only place in her hometown of Chefchaouen that displays information about her. However, the signs displayed at this museum do not cite any historians, as shown in Figure 5. According to my interview with the historian Dr. Fatima Bouchmal, who used to work in Chefchaouen to preserve and document its history, she was the one who wrote the information on these signs in 2011 in a partnership between Chefchaouen and Granada municipality.

The sign shown in Figure 7 states that al-Hurra was a Moroccan woman who proved herself on the political and national scene, which would have been highly unusual. She represents leadership in this historical period, and the conditions around her prepared her to lead. The sign notes her training by scientists and *fuqaha* (Muslim theologians) of that time, stating that she showed a high aptitude for politics and governance. This display suggests that al-Hurra's noble lineage was a major factor in her success. The title on the right of the sign states, "Sayyida al-Hurra: A Wattasid princess of 'Alami origin," emphasizing her noble origin and prestigious marriage to the Wattasid sultan. The text on the left highlights her active role as a war leader. The text in the middle states that few women have proven themselves in politics as she did, breaking the stereotype of a princess in a castle and distinguishing herself as a strong political leader. The sign also mentions that she left a strong, beautiful picture of herself not because she was married to a sultan but because she was among the very few women to hold government office in the country. It notes that she was an educated princess

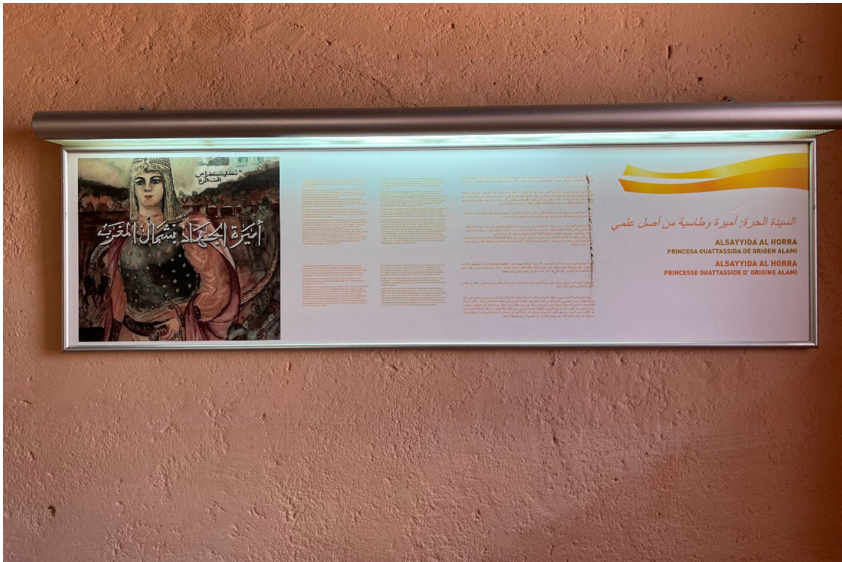


Figure 7: Sign in qasbah museum presenting information about al-Hurra.

experienced both in politics and the military, is a Moroccan and Arab icon in terms of political power and glory, and had diplomatic relations with foreign powers.

In the interview, Bouchmal explored the question of why students did not learn about al-Hurra in Moroccan schools. One issue was how history classes viewed women in general:

First of all, it is not only Sayyida al-Hurra who is not known. There are many women in the history of Morocco that we don't know. The history that we study is limited to important historical events; we don't talk about the history of women. Usually we don't teach about the role of women in the history of Morocco. It is just a minor thing.

However, Bouchmal noted “a change in the awareness of the role of women,” who “sacrificed a lot to support Islam from the beginning.” Despite this role, she noted that “In our Islamic world, traditions and culture are stronger than religion. In a patriarchal society, men's opinions hold sway, contributing to the marginalization of women...”

Bouchmal also blamed the French occupation for contributing to this marginalization as they did not want to highlight positive portrayals of Muslim women:

Occupation [of Morocco by France] fought any woman who had a bright history, distorting the picture. They didn't want to show the bright side of [our] history. French occupation attacked whatever was Islamic and sought to prove that Roman civilization was the origin [of anything positive]. Occupation distorted the picture of women. They wanted to show that women were either slaves or working on plantations.

4 Conclusion

This study explored the historical context, background, and leadership qualities of Sayyida al-Hurra, a Sufi Muslim woman who ruled over the city and environs of Tétouan in northern Morocco for 30 years during the sixteenth century. The study employed a historical and ethnographic approach, drawing data from a variety of primary and secondary Moroccan sources, including secondary Arabic literature not available in English, interviews with local historians, and visits to historical sites.

In the years leading up to al-Hurra's rule, the Spanish and Portuguese had conquered what remained of al-Andalus, forcing many Muslims and Jews to flee to northern Morocco. At the same time, the Portuguese and Spanish launched attacks along Morocco's coast, conquering cities and threatening to conquer others, while the central government in Fez was greatly weakened and unable to repel these attacks. Al-Hurra emerged as a well-trained and respected political and military leader, who employed conventional warfare, piracy, political marriages with local leaders, and a political alliance with the Ottomans to defend her people and northern Morocco.

Both of her marriages served to increase local political stability and her personal power. Her first marriage to Al-Mandri in 1510 strengthened the ties between the two ruling families of the North. During this marriage, she often ruled while her husband was away, learning much about statecraft and warfare. After her husband's death in 1519, she was appointed the governor of Tétouan and neighboring cities. When Sultan Ahmad al-Wattasi felt his reign threatened by the rise of the Saadi dynasty, he married al-Hurra in 1541. Instead of al-Hurra traveling to Fez, she required the sultan to come to her for the marriage, after which he returned to Fez and she continued ruling from her own power base. From there, she employed a large naval fleet to attack Spanish and Portuguese cities and trade through piracy. She also launched attacks on Ceuta and Asilah (Moroccan cities occupied by Portugal at that time) in 1528. She became a close ally of the Ottoman forces in Algeria against the Iberian threat, opening her markets to their goods and helping her own economy to grow through a combination of piracy and normal trade.

The sources available largely agreed on the factors that helped al-Hurra be an exceptional leader for so long. These included her respected sharifian (noble) lineage, her family's leadership in the region, an excellent education in various fields, her intelligence, flexibility, fluency in multiple languages, skill in naval warfare, and a strong personality. Despite her importance, she is seldom mentioned in local or regional history books in Arabic, and Western sources go little beyond depicting her as simply a "pirate queen." Nevertheless, there has recently been renewed interest in this figure, and local historians are starting to raise awareness about her life and legacy.

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