

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Battle of al Qasr al Kabir

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The battle of al Qasr al Kabir must rank with the great battles in world history alongside the battles of Ayn Jalut (1261), Lepanto (1571), Plassey (1757), and Stalingrad (1942). At immediate stake was the fate of Morocco. But when the battle was over, the might of Portugal had been crushed, the Portuguese king killed, and its empire lay in shambles. Two years later, Portugal itself became a colony of Spain and remained so for more than fifty years. In turn, Spain tried to leverage the wealth it had looted from Mexico and Peru to hold onto its trade monopoly with the Americas as well as preserve the Portuguese trade with West Africa and India. Like all monopolies, this effort was doomed to failure. It attracted interlopers from England, France and Morocco.

Economics and religion both played a role in the next sequence of events. Spain appealed to England to stamp out piracy but the English throne was not responsive. Meanwhile, Pope Sixtus V authorized a Catholic Crusade against England in response to its Protestant leanings (1587). Armed with a Papal edict, and seething with resentment at continued English piracy, King Phillip II of Spain resolved to conquer England. A mighty armada was assembled under Admiral Medina Sidonia and sent into the English Channel (1588) and up the Thames River. There it was met by an English fleet under Charles Howard and was destroyed. Spain made a second attempt in 1598, but this time the ill-fated Spanish fleet was caught in a storm in the Atlantic and sank. Spain bled and its hold on global trade weakened. This opened the door for the entry of Holland and England onto the world stage.

Following the Battle of Lepanto (1571), the struggle for the control of North Africa entered a new phase involving a four-way struggle between Spain, Portugal, the Ottomans and the Sa'adids of Morocco. Spain briefly occupied Tunis, but the Turkish army reclaimed it in 1572. By 1576, the Ottomans had advanced through Algeria and had taken the ancient city of Fez in Morocco as well as the important trading center of Tlemcen on the outskirts of the Sahara. The Sa'adids who wished to remain independent did not welcome this. The Sa'adid Sultan Abdulla al Ghalib conspired with the Spanish to attack Tlemcen but died before he could reach the city. Ghalib's son Muhammed became the Sultan and continued the advance. The Sa'adid court was divided between those who supported the Turks and those who sought an alliance with Spain. Two of Ghalib's brothers, Abdul Malik and Ahmed, were among those who supported a Turkish presence. Muhammed's moves to align himself with Christian Spain were unpopular with the people. Abdul Malik and Ahmed easily overthrew Muhammed with the help of the Turkish army and Abdul Malik was proclaimed the Sultan. The overthrown Muhammed Sa'adid appealed to King Phillip II of Spain for help. Phillip had his hands full with the Turks in North

Africa and Europe. Realizing that he was over committed to the defense of the Italian coast as well as helping the Hapsburgs in Vienna, he declined to intervene. Muhammed Sa'adid then turned to King Sebastian of Portugal.

The Portuguese were very active on the Atlantic coast of Morocco and in West Africa. They captured the strategic port of Tangier in 1471, and used it as a base to scuttle Moroccan trade in the Western Mediterranean. In 1505, they captured Agadir and built the powerful fortress of Santa Cruz there. This fort commanded the entrance to the Atlantic and provided a strong base from which to terrorize the Moroccan coast. This was the first of a series of forts that the Portuguese were to build around the coast of Africa as well as in India and Malaya. The port of Safi was occupied in 1507, Azempour in 1513, and Mazagan near the ancient Al Muhaddith center of Tit in 1515. In addition, the Portuguese intervened in the politics of southern Morocco, playing off one emir against another and hastening the political disintegration already under way.

The Portuguese military activity was not confined to the political arena. Slavery was also on their agenda. Portuguese piracy along the coast was not unnoticed in Morocco. However, the Maghrib at this time was in an advanced stage of social and political disintegration, which precluded any central organized resistance. The challenge was therefore taken up by the Sufi orders, which had found a welcome home in the social and political vacuum.

Organized around local *zawiyas*, the Sufi brotherhoods provided social cohesion and spiritual fulfillment at the local level. Led by Shaykh al Jazuli (d. 1465) of the Jazuliya Sufi order, resistance to Portuguese raids gathered momentum. Shaykh Al Jazuli occupies a position in Morocco similar to that held by Shaykh Moeenuddin Chishti of Ajmer in India and Baba Fareed in India and Pakistan.

One of the emirs in southern Morocco, Muhammed al Sa'adi became a follower of the shaykh, organized a resistance to Portuguese encroachments and founded the Sa'adid dynasty. His two sons Ahmed and Muhammed consolidated their holdings in southern Morocco. In 1541, Muhammed al Sa'adi drove the Portuguese from the fort of Santa Cruz, their principal base commanding an entrance to the Atlantic. Within two years (1541-1543), the Sa'adids had recaptured all the fortresses along the Moroccan coast except Tangier and Ceuta. The prestige of the Sa'adids and of the Jazuliya movement rose, while Portuguese trade with the coast of Africa and the Indian Ocean suffered a blow.

It is against this background that the Battle of al Qasr al Kabir must be examined. In 1576, when the ousted Muhammed al Sa'adi sought Portuguese help, King Sebastian saw a golden opportunity to crush the "Moors" and win the Crusades in North Africa once and for all. Extensive preparations were made, and Sebastian landed on the African coast with a seasoned army of more than 20,000. Included in this were the most capable generals, noblemen and men of war that Portugal could muster. The army was well supplied with cannon. The moment for an historic decision on the fate of the Maghrib had arrived. The gravity of the moment was well understood by the Moroccans and the Crusade was answered by the Jazuliya Sufi order. A proclamation of *jihad* went out. Soldiers gathered from far and wide. Religious fervor rose. Preparations were made and muskets and cannon were acquired from the Turks and the English.

The two armies met just south of the city of Arzila on the plain of al Qasr al Kabir. The Portuguese cannon opened up its salvos. Emir Abdul Malik fell in the first salvo. Immediately, the Jazuliyas appointed his brother Ahmed al Sa'adi as the new emir and charged forth. The burst of Moroccan cannon shook the valley. The fervor of the Jazuliya Sufis carried the day. The Portuguese army was crushed. Of the more than 20,000 invaders, only a few hundred survived to tell the story of this defeat.

Sebastian was killed. Ahmed was given the title of al Mansur, the victorious. A large amount of war material and booty was captured. Ahmed al Mansur, always short of money, used the captives to good advantage and ransomed them for gold and silver from Lisbon.

There were three kings involved in this battle-King Sebastian of Portugal, Emir Abdul Malik al Sa'adi and Emir Ahmed al Mansur al Sa'adi. For this reason, the Battle of al Qasr al Kabir is sometimes referred to as the Battle of Three Kings.

The Battle of al Qasr al Kabir was a major event in world history. It marked the end of the western Crusade. Christian ambitions in North Africa were frustrated. The Maghrib remained in the Muslim camp and did not suffer the same fate as Granada. Portugal was crippled and within two years became a vassal of Spain. Taken together with the destruction of the Spanish armada ten years later (1588), the Battle of al Qasr al Kabir marked the end of the Iberian trade monopoly with Asia and America. The Spanish Monarch took over the Portuguese trade monopoly with West Africa and India. Spain tried to guard this monopoly using the resources of the New World. In this effort, she failed because the span of control was too large for the available resources. The navies of Spain and Portugal could not patrol the vast reaches of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Pirates, profiteers and interlopers from France, England and Morocco successfully challenged the monopoly. Although Spain still enjoyed considerable power with its holdings in Mexico, Peru and the Philippines, the Spanish Empire was past its zenith. The wheels of fortune turned, a historic window of opportunity presented itself, and history waited for new players to take the center stage. It was at this juncture that the Protestant nations of northern Europe, the Dutch and the English, entered the world stage with a nascent resilience and made a dash for the trade routes linking Europe, America, Africa and India. The center of gravity of world power was moving towards northern Europe.

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