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978-0-521-10540-8 - Merchants of Essaouira: Urban Society and Imperialism in Southwestern Morocco, 1844-1886

Daniel J. Schroeter

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Chapter 1****Introduction**

Essaouira was the most important seaport in Morocco for a century, but compared with the growing port cities in the colonial area, this outlet to Europe was a backwater. Essaouira remained a small city, situated in a relatively barren region. The expansion of other Middle Eastern seaports, such as Beirut and Alexandria, was dramatic in the same period. Beirut's population grew from 6,000 to 120,000 in the nineteenth century.¹ At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Alexandria had a population of 10,000; already by the mid 1850s, the city had grown to about 150,000.² Wherever European commercial interests were strong, port cities began to grow into major emporiums of trade. In contrast, Essaouira's small scale growth from 10,000 to 18,000 seems insignificant (see app. B).

And yet, historians have often seen the development of Essaouira as highly significant in the modern history of Morocco. Abdallah Laroui argues that Sultan Muhammad III, the founder of Essaouira, can be regarded as the 'veritable architect of the "modern" Morocco described in numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts'. With the creation of Essaouira, in Laroui's view, the bulk of the state revenues were henceforth derived from customs duties on foreign trade. In this way the prosperity and the very existence of the state became dependent on an activity dominated by foreigners.³

The stress of almost all studies on Morocco, since the important book of Miège, has been on the social changes engendered by the integration of Morocco into the world capitalist system.⁴ Miège postulates that Morocco's interaction with Europe, and in particular foreign trade, led to a structural transformation of society. Capitalism developed on the margins of the traditional economy, and the growing influence of the bourgeoisie – largely Jewish – effected the economic transformation of the country.⁵ A capitalist class of farmers and landlords began to develop in both the towns and the countryside.⁶ The inland cities declined as the coastal towns grew. As in other parts of the Middle East, traditional crafts were in crisis or disappeared altogether because of the influx of cheap European manufactured goods.⁷ These assumptions have guided a

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[More information](#)*Merchants of Essaouira*

number of in-depth studies on how Moroccan society was transformed in specific towns or regions during precolonial times.⁸

These studies are an important departure from the literature of the French colonial period, which depicts Moroccan traditional society before the French protectorate as unchanging. French writings on Moroccan cities tend to focus on the historic monuments of the town and the contributions of each successive Sultan to the urban topography, but are little concerned with social change.⁹ Even the study of Fez by Roger Le Tourneau, one of the most important books on Moroccan urban life and the Islamic city generally, largely sees the precolonial city as timeless. Fez in 1900, in many respects, appears the same as in Marinid times.¹⁰ Implicit in this interpretation is that change came about under the aegis of the French protectorate, but as the recent study of André Raymond has shown – in contradistinction to the notion of urban decadence in the Ottoman period – cities of the Middle East and North Africa were developing in significant ways in the centuries preceding the nineteenth century.¹¹

In the precolonial period, social change in Moroccan cities was greatly accelerated because of the growing dependency of Morocco on Europe. European commercial expansion can be seen as the first phase in the process of foreign economic predominance, comparable to that which occurred in the countries of the Middle East.¹² Port cities in particular were susceptible to social change, because they were the principal points of contact between Europeans and the local population. Even more important, the ports served as agents of change, bridgeheads in subordinating the country as a whole to dominant western models.¹³

To what degree does Morocco's principal seaport in the nineteenth century fit this general model? How did the local merchants respond to the external forces of change, and how did they themselves act as agents of social and economic transformation? I hope to answer these questions throughout this book by examining local society and its relations with the interior of Morocco. But before I proceed, a few preliminary remarks about Essaouira are called for.

The town was founded by the Sultan to serve as a royal port, an entrepôt where all trade with Europe could be conducted. The aim of the Sultan was both to contain foreign influence and to limit the volume of trade. The town was situated in a relatively isolated location, and foreigners were not allowed to travel to the inland markets. In the town itself, foreigners and Moroccan-Jewish royal merchants were provided with special separate quarters in the *casbah*. Their premises belonged to the central government. Foreign trade, in theory, was to be closely administered by the *makhzan*. In many respects this calls to mind

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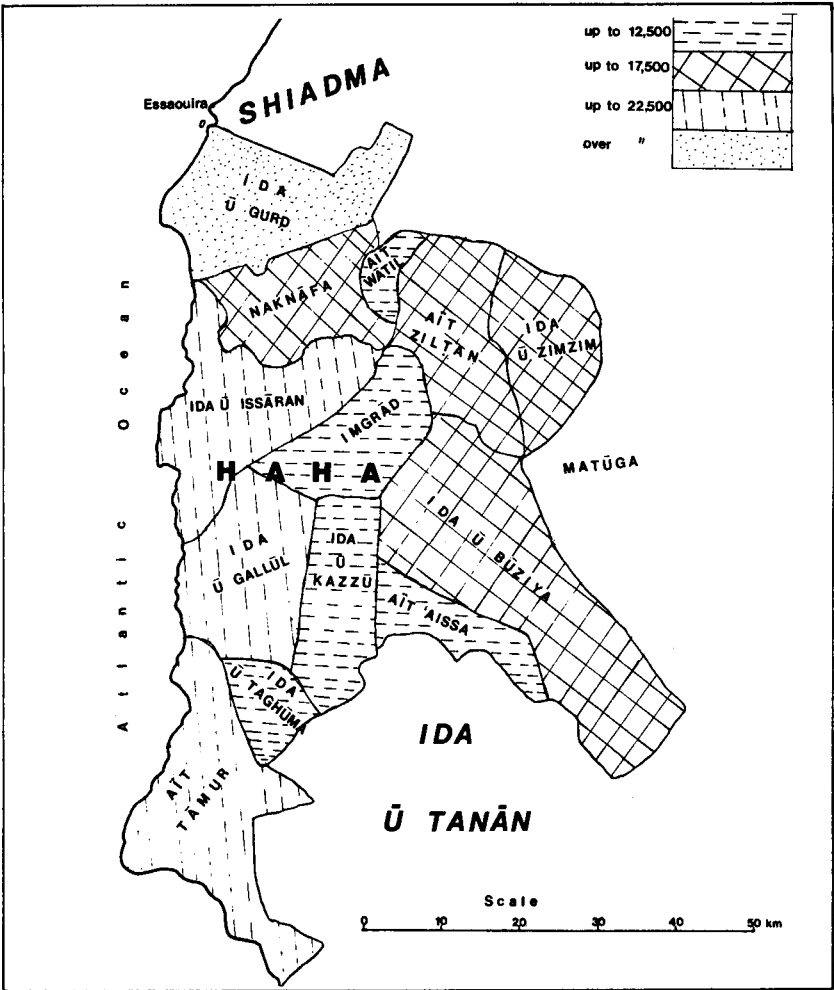
[More information](#)*Introduction*

Polanyi's 'ports of trade', in which the trading community was relatively isolated from the rest of society, playing the role of political intermediaries between political frontiers. In this paradigm, administered trade, which centres on long distance 'luxury' items, prevails over the economic process of competition.¹⁴ In some respects, the Moroccan Sultan was able to contain foreign penetration and create an economic enclave in the same way, for example, that the Chinese were able to do in their treaty ports. In China, foreigners were confined to a specific quarter in Canton, and not allowed to travel elsewhere (except on special tributary missions to bring gifts to the Emperor) nor trade with other ports. Foreign trade became a state monopoly, and European merchants were compelled to trade with official Chinese intermediaries. Treaty ports grew rapidly in China in the nineteenth century, though their impact on the traditional Chinese economy remained limited.¹⁵

However, it would be misleading to carry this model too far. Essaouira's economic isolation and political neutrality were always relative, and certainly never complete. The urban patterns that evolved came to resemble those of other Muslim cities, and Moroccan cities in particular. Furthermore, the Sultan progressively lost his control of commerce. Essaouira's trade, even from the very beginning of the town's existence, operated according to the practices which were rooted in Moroccan society. Essaouira was therefore both unique, as an administered port of trade, yet similar to other cities.

In light of the size and economic position of the major inland cities of Morocco, the importance of the coastal ports in the socio-economic transformation of Morocco needs to be placed in perspective. The economic importance of the interior, and domestic trade generally, still greatly overshadowed that of the coast. Despite the assertions that the major inland cities of Fez and Marrakesh were in decline,¹⁶ there is little solid evidence to suggest that the rather limited growth of coastal towns was necessarily at the expense, either demographic or economic, of the major inland cities of Morocco. Though there were probably dramatic fluctuations in Marrakesh's population in the nineteenth century, there are no obvious signs of an overall decline in this period.¹⁷ Marrakesh still remained the capital and the most important commercial emporium for southern Morocco. Furthermore, the vast majority of Morocco's population of several million inhabitants resided in the countryside. It can be surmised that the urban population in Morocco ranged between five and ten per cent.¹⁸ The rural population in the hinterland of Essaouira – in the Haha and Shiadma – numbered at least ten times as high as the inhabitants of the town (see map 2).¹⁹ Morocco, therefore, remained essentially a rural society.²⁰ Bearing this in mind, the primary concern of

Merchants of Essaouira



the Moroccan Sultan was the control of the countryside. The largest potential source of revenue for the *makhzan* remained in the rural sector. Recent research in tax registers has revealed that the state derived much more income from the interior than from customs duties at the coast ports in the latter half of the nineteenth century.²¹

The significance of Essaouira, therefore, lay not only in the de-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

pendency of the *makhzan* on customs duties from foreign trade, which were important, but did not constitute the main fiscal resource of the state, but also in its geopolitical position in the control of southwestern Morocco. By linking the fortunes of potentially dissident chiefs of the Sous to the commercial activity of the royal port of Essaouira, the Sultan hoped to keep the more distant parts of the country within the fold. It should be borne in mind that at the beginning of the 'Alawid dynasty the sultanate was threatened by a rival dynasty of *shurafā'* – men of sacred lineage – from Iligh in the Sous.²²

This essentially domestic strategy had unforeseeable consequences. By opening up the Sous trade to Europeans, foreign penetration was facilitated, which was to undermine the Sultan's concomitant aim of containing foreign influence and keeping foreign trade at a minimal level. The native merchants of Essaouira themselves served as agents of foreign penetration. The closely controlled system of royal trade was challenged by the fact that the royal merchants (*tujjār as-Sulṭān*), like the Chinese compradors, became brokers for the foreign companies doing business in Morocco.²³

Some of the *tujjār as-Sulṭān* became wealthy in their role as middlemen. Yet this wealth itself often implied dependency on Europe. The domestic possibilities for investment remained extremely limited, so the most successful Moroccan merchants invested in foreign banks and companies.²⁴ This underlines the limitations of their influence in Moroccan society as a whole. Though the *tujjār as-Sulṭān* may have tried to emulate western culture, they remained embedded in Moroccan society, and while they were responsible for distributing European imports domestically, they did not restructure the traditional Moroccan economy along western lines. European domination during colonial rule ultimately did transform the Moroccan economy, and integrated the country into a European-based capitalist market economy,²⁵ but the process of structural change took place much more gradually than historians have admitted. From hindsight one risks interpreting all events and activities relating to foreign trade as steps in the development of capitalism in Morocco. While the ports of trade served as bridgeheads for foreign penetration, in the nineteenth century, they did not subordinate Moroccan culture to a dominant western model. Despite the progress of foreign economic penetration, European interests were too limited, and the country remained too resilient for a significant restructuring to occur.

The approach of Miège, which focuses on Morocco's integration into a world economic system, needs to be reversed. In this book, I intend to place the trading community of Essaouira in a Moroccan context.

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[More information](#)

Merchants of Essaouira

Immanuel Wallerstein's important theory on how the 'core' subjugated the 'periphery' provides an interesting conceptual framework for the development of a European world-economy,²⁶ but it does not take into consideration, as Eric Wolf points out, 'the reactions of the micro-populations habitually investigated by anthropologists'.²⁷ Morocco was in upheaval because of foreign political and economic penetration, but the continuities of 'traditional' Moroccan society were also propelled by their own dynamics. Through depicting the lives of the people of Essaouira, I hope to give a sense of what Moroccan culture and society was like in the age of European economic expansion.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Chapter 2

The royal port

He who comes [to Essaouira] poor, leaves rich.

A saying attributed to Sultan Sīdī Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh at the time of the foundation of Essaouira¹

The situation of Mogadore [Essaouira] is the most desolate that can be imagined, and nothing but the advantages afforded to trade and the superiority of the harbour over the others of the Empire could ever reconcile merchants to an establishment here. An unbroken chain of high sandhills, totally bare of vegetation, meet the eye along the coast, and for miles inland the same aspect is presented, with the exception of here and there, a small cultivated spot, between the hills.

British vice-consul, Mr. Grace²

In 1764, the new town of Essaouira was founded by Sultan Sīdī Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh (1756–80) due west of Marrakesh on the Atlantic coast. It was to be Morocco’s main seaport for trade with Europe. The Sultan, as legend suggests, intended to make the port a great and prosperous city where the principal Moroccan merchants could dwell and make fortunes.

Essaouira did indeed become the principal maritime port of Morocco within a decade after its creation, a status it maintained for over a century. But the legendary grandeur of the royal port of Sultan Muhammad III contrasts markedly with the stark reality portrayed by vice-consul Grace. Essaouira in its heyday in the mid-nineteenth century was an unexceptional and desolate place, certainly in comparison to other major ports of the Maghreb and the Middle East of the same era. It remained a small city, situated in a relatively barren region.

Mogador, the site

The creation from scratch of the new town of Essaouira was seen by the chroniclers of Moroccan dynastic history as one of the major achievements of the Sultan Muhammad III.³ In many respects, it can be considered a bold decision. The immediate surroundings of the site were

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Merchants of Essaouira*

infertile; to the south, an almost constant wind caused the sands to shift and made cultivation extremely difficult. The small desolate village of Diabet (*Dhiyābāt*), situated immediately to the south of the site on the Wad Qsab (*qasab*), was the only settlement in the area.⁴ The inland region of Haha (*Ha'hā'*) to the south of the site contained few villages, whose inhabitants usually resided in "homesteads" or small hamlets separated from their fellow tribesmen. This was quite uncharacteristic of most of Morocco, where the countryside was dotted with villages. Most of Haha is hilly or mountainous. Its inhabitants, then as today, were occupied with the cultivation of argan (a tree unique to southwestern Morocco, whose fruit is made into an oil and used as a staple in the diet) or olive trees, and raising goats.⁵ In the Shiadma region to the east and the north of the town, the relief rises sharply. The first zone where grains and legumes were extensively cultivated was in the plains of Akarmūd some 30 kilometres to the north of Essaouira. Unlike most towns, Essaouira therefore lacked a fertile hinterland and food supplies had to be transported over considerable distances.

Despite the unfavourable terrain, the Essaouira's site did have a few assets which had attracted foreigners in the past. A natural harbour was partially sheltered by an island situated about 1,500 metres offshore, or about 900 metres from the port. In ancient times the island was settled by the Phoenicians and used as a trading station and a centre for the production of a purple dye. Archaeological discoveries show evidence of both a Roman and Byzantine presence on the island.⁶ In 1506, the Portuguese constructed a small fortress on the mainland next to the sea, though their occupation was short-lived, in contrast to the long-lasting Portuguese settlement at Mazagan (later to become El Jadida when the Moroccans captured the town). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both the French and the British made periodic landings on the island. Only the Portuguese envisaged penetrating the hinterland from that part of the coast, but their plans were never realized and their occupation in the region was soon abandoned.⁷

The sparsity of population in the vicinity of Mogador may very well have been considered an advantage by the Sultan. Starting the town anew, the sovereign could establish a military and commercial colony which would be closely administered by the central government. The past had often proved that a rooted and disgruntled urban elite could challenge 'Alawid authority. Furthermore, the central government had little control over the southern littoral, where the local chiefs were appropriating the customs' revenues from foreign trade for themselves.⁸ The southern regions were the richest in the products of the Moroccan trade which were sought after by the Europeans: olive oil, ostrich feathers, goat skins, gum arabic, and almonds.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The royal port***Royal plans**

The notion of a royal port town, closely administered by the sovereign, has been considered as quite exceptional among North African cities. In both scholarly studies and travel books, the topography of the town together with its economy, are compared to foreign models. In one discussion, Essaouira is compared to the classical Chinese city, where the sovereign dominates commerce and urban activities, and allocates dwelling to an imported 'alien' population (here, the Jews are implied). In this paradigm, the town itself is built by the sovereign in a geometric chessboard pattern. Above all, it is a trading entrepôt and not a centre for the creation of wealth.⁹

To many French colonial writers, the architecture and layout of the city appeared different to that of other Moroccan towns. A legend, still popular in Essaouira today, attributes the design of the town to a Frenchman, Théodore Cournut, who had previously been employed by Louis XV for the fortifications of Roussillon. Cournut, however, is absent from contemporary Arabic sources, and a French account of the construction of Essaouira in 1765 makes no mention of a French engineer employed by the Moroccan Sultan. It is plausible that a plan for Essaouira was drawn up by Cournut, but according to tradition, Cournut was dismissed and the work was completed by Genoese renegades. An English renegade was also alleged to have played an important role in completing the construction. In the town itself, the few inscriptions on the old walls are ambiguous. Residents of Essaouira argue over the readings of the inscriptions at the gangway (*sqāla*, from the Italian *scala*) of the port: is it signed Aḥmad *al-ʿilj* (the renegade), the reputed English renegade? Or should the inscription read Aḥmad *Uharū* which linguistically would suggest Berber origin?¹⁰

To attribute the physical layout of the town to European influence is misleading. In the classic French colonial history of Morocco by Henri Terrasse, the construction of Mogador designed by the French engineer Cournut figures very prominently in the description of the period.¹¹ In the words of another French writer: 'Louis XV adds to this military work a charm which one would not expect to find there and which makes Mogador France's first town laid on the shore of Africa.'¹²

These assumptions, made on the physical layout of the town and its economic and administrative structure, are inaccurate and are based on faulty premises regarding the typologies of North African cities. The fact that Essaouira was planned from scratch in a way made it inevitable that some of the principal thoroughfares, markets, and royal and governmental domains would be constructed on a kind of geometric grid pattern, similar to planned cities found in western Europe since the

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[More information](#)

Merchants of Essaouira



1 Inscription of the *sqāla* at the port of Essaouira
‘1184. *al-Ḥamdu lillāh hadhā al-bāb amara bi-binā’ihi fakhr al-mulūk Sayyid Muḥammad ‘alā yad mamlūkihi Aḥmad al-['Ilj] Ūharū* [or possibly *al-‘Ajj*]
‘1770–1. Praise God, glory of the kings, Sayyid Muḥammad [the Sultan] ordered his slave Aḥmad al-[. . .] to construct this gate’



2 Engraving of Essaouira, early nineteenth century
From Jacopo Gråberg di Hemsö, *Specchio geografico e statistico dell'imperio di Marocco* (Genoa, 1834)