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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Morocco's Journey into the Modern Age: A Critical Reflection on M. G. Arenal's Dissertation

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| ABSTRACT

Historians globally tend to follow a common periodization model, especially the traditional tripartite division of history into Ancient, Middle, and Modern periods. This approach, however, often overlooks the unique histories of different regions and carries inherent biases. Mercedes Garcia Arenal, a prominent Spanish historian, adopted this conventional periodization to analyze Morocco's history, arguing that Morocco transitioned into the Modern Age in a similar way to Western countries. In her work *Ahmad al-Mansur: The Beginning of the Modern Age*, Arenal supports this view by citing political and economic developments in Morocco during the 15th and 16th centuries, particularly focusing on Morocco's interactions with Europe. This article critically examines Arenal's thesis, arguing that her application of Western-centric periodization to Morocco is unconvincing. Morocco did not undergo the transformative changes associated with the Modern Age. Rather, the economic, political, and social structures that characterized the Middle Ages persisted until the establishment of the Protectorate in 1912. Thus, applying the same periodization model to Morocco leads to a distorted understanding of its historical development. Additionally, alternative periodization models proposed by Moroccan historians, such as Houbaida's, are also found to be insufficient in addressing the underlying issue. While Houbaida presents a different framework, it does not fully overcome the challenges posed by Western periodization models or account for the complexities of Morocco's history. Given these shortcomings, it is clear that historians must urgently reconsider the periodization of Morocco's history. A more contextually appropriate model is needed to reflect the region's unique trajectory, one that moves beyond the limitations of traditional Western frameworks and offers a more accurate understanding of Morocco's historical development.

| KEYWORDS

Authors Modern Age, Modern Morocco, Periodization, Morocco's history, Ahmad al-Mansur, Spain, Teleology

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The debate surrounding the onset of the Modern Age in Morocco and across the broader Islamic world continues to intrigue historians, sparking vigorous discussions about the defining characteristics, temporal boundaries, and conceptual validity of this historical period when applied to non-Western contexts. In Morocco's case, this controversy takes on particular significance due to the country's unique historical trajectory, which resists easy categorization within conventional Eurocentric periodization models. The crux of the debate lies in whether Morocco experienced a transformative historical phase that genuinely corresponds to what Western historiography identifies as the Modern Age - typically characterized by phenomena such as secularization, industrialization, the rise of nation-states, and scientific revolution - or whether these European benchmarks fundamentally misrepresent Morocco's historical reality. This scholarly disagreement stems from deeper epistemological tensions between universalizing historical narratives and localized experiences of change, with some historians arguing that Morocco's development followed an entirely different rhythm shaped by Islamic governance structures, trans-Saharan trade networks, and indigenous forms of intellectual renewal.

The controversy becomes especially pronounced when examining Morocco's 18th and 19th century history, where one finds neither the clear ruptures nor the progressive linearity that define Western modernity narratives, but rather complex adaptations to global shifts that maintained strong continuities with traditional political and religious frameworks. This has led some scholars to question whether the very concept of a "Modern Age" is applicable to Morocco at all, or whether alternative periodization models - perhaps based on dynastic cycles, Islamic reform movements, or colonial encounters - would provide more meaningful frameworks for understanding the country's historical evolution. The debate ultimately reflects broader methodological challenges in world history, forcing historians to reconsider whether modernity should be understood as a universal historical phase or as a culturally specific construct that may not adequately capture the experiences of societies outside the European core.

Mercedes García-Arenal, the distinguished Spanish historian and renowned scholar of Arabic and Islamic studies, has emerged as one of the most original and influential voices in contemporary debates about periodization and historical transitions in the Maghreb. As a researcher at Spain's National Research Council (CSIC) and professor at the School of Arabic Studies in Granada, her extensive body of work offers a profound critique of Eurocentric historical frameworks while developing alternative methodologies for understanding North Africa's past. Her scholarship on Moroccan history is particularly noteworthy for its nuanced approach to the complex question of modernity, which she examines through meticulous analysis of Arabic sources, careful attention to local historical consciousness, and innovative comparative perspectives.

García-Arenal's work demonstrates how the reign of Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur (1578–1603) - the powerful Saadi ruler known as "al-Mansur al-Dhahabi" (the Golden Conqueror) - presents a compelling case study that challenges conventional periodization. Through her examination of this transformative period, she reveals how al-Mansur's sophisticated state-building projects, ambitious economic reforms, and dynamic diplomatic engagements with both European and African powers reflected a distinctly Moroccan articulation of early modernity that cannot be understood through Western paradigms alone. Her research highlights how the Sultan's establishment of a sugar monopoly, his development of trans-Saharan trade networks, his military expansion into the Songhai Empire, and his elaborate court culture all represented innovative adaptations to global changes while remaining firmly rooted in Islamic political traditions and local power structures.

What makes García-Arenal's contribution particularly significant is her ability to connect these historical specifics to broader theoretical questions about how we conceptualize historical time and transition. She argues persuasively that al-Mansur's reign exemplifies the need for more flexible, culturally-grounded models of periodization that acknowledge Morocco's autonomous historical dynamics rather than measuring them against European benchmarks. Her work shows how the Sultan's famous alliance with Elizabeth I of England against Spain, often cited as evidence of "modern" statecraft, was in fact part of a longer tradition of Maghrebi strategic diplomacy that predated European influence. Similarly, she demonstrates how the intellectual flourishing of al-Mansur's court, with its mix of Muslim, Jewish and Christian scholars, represented not the beginning of Western-style secularization but rather a particularly vibrant moment in Morocco's indigenous traditions of pluralistic learning. By centering her analysis on such figures and moments, García-Arenal provides a powerful alternative to both Orientalist narratives that saw Islamic societies as stagnant and nationalist histories that sought to fit Moroccan experiences into imported models of progress. Her scholarship invites us to reconsider fundamental assumptions about what constitutes historical change and how different societies experience and define their own modernities. This approach has made her work indispensable not only for understanding Morocco's past but also for developing more inclusive and representative frameworks for global history as a whole. Through her detailed studies of figures like al-Mansur and her broader theoretical reflections, García-Arenal has fundamentally reshaped how scholars approach the complex relationship between Islamic societies and the concept of the modern age.

Before engaging in a discussion about whether the conventional pattern of historical periodization aligns with Morocco’s historical trajectory, it is crucial to first examine the concept of periodization from an epistemological standpoint, along with its cognitive foundations and inherent biases. Historical division is far from an innocent or neutral practice; instead, it is a teleological approach shaped by numerous considerations and underlying prejudgments. The way we split history into distinct periods carries with it assumptions about causality, progress, and direction, which can influence our understanding of historical processes.

2. Methodology

The methodology of research in this study is grounded in a critical historiographical approach, which involves a thorough examination and evaluation of existing historical frameworks and their applicability to non-Western contexts, specifically Morocco. We analyzed primary and secondary sources, including the works of Mercedes García-Arenal and other historians, to assess the validity of Eurocentric periodization models. By comparing these models with indigenous historical narratives, such as those proposed by Ibn Khaldun and Mohamed Houbaida, the study highlights the epistemological biases inherent in traditional Western historiography and advocates for a more contextually appropriate framework.

The research employs a comparative methodology to juxtapose Morocco's historical trajectory with that of Europe, particularly during the 16th century, a period often cited as the beginning of the Modern Age in Western historiography. We scrutinized key political, economic, and social developments in Morocco under Ahmad al-Mansur, such as international diplomacy, trade networks, and military campaigns, to determine whether these align with the transformative changes associated with European modernity. This comparative analysis reveals the limitations of applying Western-centric periodization to Morocco, as the study demonstrates the persistence of medieval structures in Moroccan society well into the 19th century.
Additionally, the study incorporates a theoretical critique of periodization as a conceptual tool, drawing on the works of scholars like Reinhart Koselleck and Kathleen Davis to deconstruct the teleological assumptions underlying historical divisions. The authors argue for an alternative periodization model that prioritizes local historical benchmarks, such as dynastic cycles, colonial encounters, and indigenous reforms, over imported Western frameworks. This methodological approach not only challenges dominant historiographical paradigms but also opens avenues for reimagining Morocco's history on its own terms, free from the constraints of Eurocentric narratives.

3. The Historical Periodization: The Main Biases

The historians' concern with periodization is not a recent issue linked to the epistemological progress in History as a science since the late 19th century. Rather, it represents a fundamental and enduring challenge in historical methodology that has evolved over millennia.[1] However, the early indications that prove historians' awareness of periodization as "a historical practice that orders space in time"[2] can be traced back to pre-modern intellectual traditions long before the scientific revolutions of the 19th century. The conceptual foundations of historical periodization emerged from deep-rooted human attempts to comprehend temporal continuity and change, reflecting broader cosmological and philosophical understandings of time.[3]
A particularly formative development occurred during the Renaissance humanist movement, when scholars began systematically articulating historical periodization as an analytical framework. The Italian cleric and poet Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) played a pioneering role in this regard by formulating what would become the enduring tripartite division of Western history.[4] Petrarch's conceptual breakthrough distinguished between three epochs: the luminous classical antiquity (embodied by Greco-Roman civilization), an intervening period of cultural stagnation which he disparagingly termed the "Dark Ages" (tenebrae), and his own era which he celebrated as a time of rebirth (renascentia) of classical learning and values.[5] This schematic division, though later modified by historians who replaced the pejorative "Dark Ages" with the more neutral "Middle Ages" (medium aevum), established the basic periodization framework that continues to influence Western historiography.[6]

Petrarch's formulation was particularly significant because it represented more than mere chronological classification – it embodied an emerging Renaissance historical consciousness that deliberately positioned contemporary scholars as active participants in a grand historical narrative.[7] His periodization scheme served specific ideological purposes, reinforcing the humanists' claim to have broken with medieval scholastic traditions while reviving authentic classical thought.[8] This early example demonstrates how periodization has always functioned as a powerful epistemological tool that both reflects and shapes historical understanding, revealing as much about the periodizers' worldview as about the periods themselves. The endurance of this basic framework, despite numerous scholarly challenges and modifications, attests to the profound influence of these early conceptualizations on modern historical thought.[9]

Petrarch's pejorative framing of the Middle Ages as a period of cultural stagnation between two epochs of enlightenment was far from an isolated perspective. This hierarchical view of historical time became deeply entrenched in Western historiography, demonstrating how periodization schemes often reflect ideological positions rather than objective realities. As Kathleen Davis (2008) insightfully argues in *Periodization and Sovereignty*, the division of history into discrete periods constitutes "not simply the drawing of an arbitrary line through time, but a complex process of conceptualizing categories which are posited as homogeneous and retroactively validated by the designation of a period divide."[10] This profound observation reveals how periodization functions

[1] Peter Burke, The Sense of Historical Perspective in Renaissance Italy, pp, 325-346.
[2] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, p. 89.
[3] Anthony Grafton, Dating History: The Renaissance & the Reformation of Chronology, pp, 74-85.
[4] Theodor Mommsen, Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages, pp, 226-242.
[5] Wallace Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation*, pp. 11-28.
[6] Beryl Smalley, *Historians in the Middle Ages*, p. 156.
[7] John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, pp. 33-47.
[8] Zachary Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past*, ch. 3.
[9] William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*, pp. 215-230.
[10] Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time*, p. 3.

as an epistemological apparatus that creates artificial coherence from historical complexity while serving particular intellectual and political agendas.

The institutionalization of Petrarch's tripartite model reached its apogee with the work of German historian Christoph Cellarius (1638-1707), whose *Historia Tripartita* (1685-1696) formally codified the division of Western history into Antiquity, Middle Ages, and Modernity. By the late Enlightenment period, this framework had become so dominant that, as Davis notes, it came to "define the structure of academic departments and research,"[11] shaping the very organization of knowledge production in European universities. This institutionalization reflects what French historian Jacques Le Goff termed "the tyranny of the Middle Ages" - the way this artificial period became naturalized through academic practice and scholarly repetition.
Additionally, outside Europe, particularly in the Islamic world, historians developed other periodization models compatible with the privacy of events happening in Eastern countries. For instance, Ibn Khaldun (1332- 1406) authored the renowned historical work "The Book of Lessons" (*Kitaab Al-Ibar*) around the same time as Petrarch. However, unlike the Italian historian, Ibn Khaldun used an alternative method of periodization that was spreading among Muslim historians during the Middle Ages. He divided the historical time according to the history of States and their appending changes, the ethnic groups, and the geographical entities.[12]

Ibn Khaldun divided global history into four periods. The first period saw the rise of nations such as the Persians, Syriacs, Tababita, Israelis, and Copts, each contributing to early civilizations. The second period marked the transformation of the Persian nation, with changes in political structures and influence. The third period was dominated by the Islamic state, which unified diverse peoples and spread Islamic civilization across regions. Finally, the fourth period witnessed the emergence of ethnic states, where specific ethnic groups formed independent nation-states based on identity. This framework reflects the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations.[13]

Renowned Muslim historical works, including Ibn Khaldun's, often trace history from the time of Adam to the emergence of Islam, and provide a foundational context for the development of civilizations. These works then proceed to discuss the histories of various states, ethnic groups, and geographical entities. For example, they explore the histories of groups like the Berbers, Arabs, and Turks, highlighting their cultural and political evolution. Similarly, the histories of geographical regions such as the Maghreb, Al-Andalus, and the Arabian Peninsula are detailed to illustrate the rise and influence of these regions within the broader Islamic civilization. This approach reflects a deep connection between religion, ethnicity, and geography in shaping historical narratives.

In the Muslim tradition of historiography, periodization did not involve value judgments about different historical periods, and it was not uniform across all historians. Each historian developed a system of periodization suited to the specific focus of their work, whether it be based on dynastic shifts, religious transformations, or other socio-political changes. Unlike Western frameworks, which categorize history into distinct periods such as Ancient, Middle, and Modern, Islamic historiography does not adhere to this model. Instead, it often emphasizes a more fluid, context-driven understanding of history, with an emphasis on continuity, cyclical patterns, and the interplay between culture, religion, and governance. In this vein, what does Modernity mean as a historical stage following the Middle Ages?

From the 18th century onwards, historiography has engaged in vigorous debates over the emergence of Modernity, with scholars offering nuanced interpretations of its defining characteristics. Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006), a key figure in conceptual history, understands Modernity as qualitative developments "not only in terms of industry, politics, or demographics but also in the fundamental way individuals experienced time and situated themselves within history."[14] He argues that Modernity entailed not just material transformations—such as industrialization, political revolutions, or demographic shifts—but also a profound change in the human experience of time and historical consciousness. According to Koselleck, the transition to Modernity involved a shift from a cyclical or providential understanding of time to a future-oriented, progressive temporality, where the "horizon of expectation" (future projections) increasingly diverged from the "space of experience" (past events).[15] This reconfiguration allowed individuals to perceive themselves as active participants in shaping history rather than passive subjects of predetermined fate. Similarly, Chris Lorenz has emphasized the epistemological dimensions of Modernity, examining how historical narratives themselves became tools for constructing modern identities and legitimizing political and social orders.[16] Julia Angster, in her work on global modernity, extends this discussion by highlighting the interconnectedness of economic, cultural, and temporal transformations, arguing that Modernity must be understood as a multi-layered process that unfolded unevenly across different

[11] Almuth Ebke & Christoph Haack, Periodisation and Modernity: An Introduction, p, 5.
[12] Abdurrahman Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima***,** p. 6,7.
[13] Ibid., p. 29.
[14] Almuth Ebke & Christoph Haack, Periodisation and Modernity: An Introduction, p. 6.
[15] Almuth Ebke & Christoph Haack, Periodisation and Modernity: An Introduction, p. 6.
[16] Chris Lorenz**,** *Bridging the gap: Between history and the philosophy of history*, pp. 34-55.

regions and societies.[17] Together, these scholars illustrate that Modernity was not merely a period marked by technological or institutional changes but a fundamental reorientation in how individuals and societies conceptualized their place within history, time, and collective memory. This perspective underscores the importance of historiography not just as a record of the past but as a critical lens for understanding the very structures of modern thought and experience.

Based on the above, the concept of the Modern Age inevitably suggests qualitative advancements, particularly those experienced by Western countries since the Renaissance moment in the 15th and 16th centuries. This period marked significant shifts in science, politics, and culture, including the rise of secularism, individualism, and capitalism. As Kathleen Davis argued, historians gradually globalized this Western-centered pattern of temporal division, and applied it to their history works.[18]This process led to the widespread adoption of the categories of Ancient, Middle, and Modern periods, despite the fact that such divisions were not inherent to other cultural or historiographical traditions, such as in the Islamic world.
On the other hand, despite this general consensus among Western historians, there is disagreement regarding the starting point and scope of the Modern Age. While early historians, such as Petrarch in the 14th century and others, viewed the Renaissance as the dawn of Modernity, others, including C. A. Bayly**,** associated it with the nineteen-century circumstances, exactly between 1780 and 1914. During this period, the Western world experienced numerous revolutions — industrial, social, political, and cultural. For instance, the birth of the "Modern World", according to Bayly, was associated with significant transformations, encompassing the rise of the nation-state, the centralization of power, global commercial, and intellectual links…[19]

In sum, the concept of the Modern Age is not a universal framework that seamlessly applies to all historical narratives but rather a construct deeply rooted in Western epistemological traditions. Emerging from Europe's specific socio-economic, political, and intellectual developments—such as the Enlightenment, industrialization, and the rise of nation-states—the idea of Modernity reflects a particular historical trajectory that cannot be uncritically imposed on other regions. Historians who attempt to apply this Eurocentric model to non-Western societies encounter significant constraints, as the material, cultural, and temporal conditions that defined European Modernity often did not exist elsewhere in the same form. For instance, while Europe experienced a sharp break from feudalism to capitalism, many non-Western societies underwent colonial subjugation, which disrupted indigenous developments and imposed external frameworks of "progress." Moreover, the linear, future-oriented temporality central to Western Modernity contrasts with alternative conceptions of time found in other civilizations, such as cyclical or pluralistic historical traditions in Asia, Africa, or the Americas. These differences challenge the very premise of a singular "Modern Age," revealing it as a provincial rather than a global paradigm.

In this vein, the historians' attempts to merge Eastern histories into the Western periodisation framework, including Morocco, are a hard task and fraught with conceptual and methodological difficulties, and it may ultimately be doomed to fail. M. G. Arenal's attempt is one of the significant attempts to link Morocco's history with global periodization depending on different historical evidence. In this critical review, we will assess this attempt by wondering if it offers factually persuasive historical evidence or merely unfounded allegations.

4. The Problem of the Modern Age in Morocco's History: The G. A. Mercedes Assumptions

Mercedes started her work by quoting renowned orientalist Bernard Lewis's (2016-2018) statement who says that Morocco, historically, was a remote and isolated land in the far west of the Islamic world, that kept it away from the historical streams, particularly the oriental streams.[20] This perspective positions Moroccan history on the margins of world history, outside the traditional framework of periodization commonly used by historians, and distinct from Western historical narratives. However, in contrast to Lewis's view, the history of Morocco, from prehistoric times onward, provides abundant evidence highlighting the country's significant contribution to Mediterranean civilization throughout human history, continuing to the present day.
According to M. G. Arenal, the Modern Age in the Moroccan context is not an absolute fictional assumption that does not have plausible ties with historical fact. Unlike B. Lewis's view, it has deep roots in Moroccan history and illustrates significant advancements that Morocco experienced, particularly during the sixteenth century, which coincided with the era of Ahmad al-Mansur. Arenal argues that this period signifies a crucial phase in Morocco's historical development, with notable achievements resonant with broader historical progressions.

Some Historians, including M. G. Arenal, have found historical evidence that clearly shows an overlap between local and Mediterranean history. For instance, M. G. Arenal says, "The Morocco of Moulay Ahmad al-Mansur was very much connected with

[17] Julian Angster, (2012), *Consumer Capitalism and Social Democracy: The Westernization of SPD and DGB.*
[18] Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time*, p. 5.
[19] Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern world (1780-1914)***,** p. 11.
[20] Mercedes Garcia-Arenal*, Ahmad al-Mansur: The Beginnings of Modern Morocco***,** p,1.

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."[21]Thus, for other histories and nations outside the Mediterranean basin, the concept of the Modern Age as a stage among the historical line is primarily defined by how their histories intertwine with Western history.
In her work *Ahmad al-Mansur: The Beginning of Modern Morocco*, M. G. Arenal draws on numerous historical events and examples to emphasize the deep connection between Moroccan and Mediterranean histories. She highlights key moments that illustrate Morocco's active involvement in broader historical developments, showing that the country was not isolated but rather engaged with the Mediterranean world. Arenal's analysis demonstrates that Morocco's history, particularly during the era of Ahmad al-Mansur, is deeply intertwined with the broader shifts of the Modern Age. Through these examples, she argues that Morocco's advancements during this period align with the larger historical transformations taking place in the Mediterranean and beyond.

On this occasion, it is not possible to cover all the events Arenal discussed regarding this subject, but we have highlighted some key aspects that we believe are sufficient to illuminate her views on periodization and Morocco's entry into the Modern Age. These include Morocco's active participation in international politics and diplomacy, its involvement in trade, conquests, and discoveries, which demonstrate the country's significant role in shaping the broader historical fabric. These elements support Arenal's assumptions about Morocco's connection to the Modern Age and its contribution to global developments.

4.1 Morocco Partaking in International Politics

The 16th century marked a pivotal moment in world history, distinguished by profound political, economic, and social transformations that many historians identify as the dawn of the Modern Age. This period witnessed the rise of centralized monarchies, the expansion of global trade networks, and the intellectual upheavals of the Renaissance and Reformation—all of which contributed to a decisive break from medieval structures. Maritime empires such as Spain, Portugal, England, and the Dutch Republic emerged as dominant political and economic forces, driving European expansion through exploration, colonization, and the establishment of transoceanic trade routes. The Columbian Exchange, the rise of mercantilism, and the influx of New World silver into global markets revolutionized economies, while the printing press and Protestant Reformation reshaped intellectual and religious landscapes. These developments not only redefined Europe's internal dynamics but also initiated an era of global interconnectedness, laying the foundations for capitalism, modern state systems, and Europe's eventual global hegemony. However, while these changes were undeniably transformative within Europe, their characterization as the "beginning of modernity" remains a Eurocentric perspective, as other regions experienced continuity rather than rupture during this period.

The 16thcentury was also defined by the Age of Discovery, with the exploration of the Americas (the New World) sparking intense and widespread struggles between major global powers over colonies in North America, Africa, and Asia. These powers also competed fiercely for precious metals such as gold, silver, and copper, along with valuable commodities from the East. Despite internal conflicts and political power struggles among local rivalries, Morocco participated in global history during this period, particularly during the reign of Ahmad al-Mansur. His era marked Morocco's significant involvement in international affairs, contributing to broader global dynamics.

One of the main events that illustrated Morocco's presence in the world arena was the policy of alliances pursued by Ahmed al-Mansur. In 1581, Morocco signed a twenty-year peace treaty with Spain to guarantee protection in eastern borders against any Ottoman offensive, and at the same time to avoid Spain's exploitation of two Moroccan captive princes (Moulay al-Shaykh and Moulay-al Nasr) who had taken refuge to Philip II (1558-1598) after the Alcazar battle (1578), Which Ahmad al-Mansur feared Philip II would wield to destabilize Morocco .[22]

The Spanish Monarchy viewed Morocco not only as a neighboring kingdom but also as a potential gateway for its European rivals—particularly England—to destabilize Spanish dominance in the Western Mediterranean. Fearful that an Anglo-Moroccan alliance could facilitate English naval incursions or even support a rebellion among former Al-Andalus communities, Spain intensified its surveillance of Moroccan politics and cultivated ties with anti-English factions within the Sultanate. Spanish diplomats also leveraged religious divisions, presenting Catholic Spain as a bulwark against Protestant England's influence in Muslim North Africa. Meanwhile, naval patrols near the Gibraltar Strait were increased to intercept any clandestine communications or arms shipments between the two powers. These measures underscored Spain's determination to preserve its geostrategic supremacy by preemptively neutralizing any coalition that might threaten its control over this critical maritime corridor and its lingering claims on Iberian territories. Ultimately, Spain's policies reflected a broader early modern trend where emerging nation-states sought to secure their peripheries through a mix of diplomacy, espionage, and military posturing.

[21] Ibid.**,** p. 2.
[22] Mercedes Garcia-Arenal*, Ahmad al-Mansur: The Beginnings of Modern Morocco***,** pp. 77-78.

Despite the apparent Morocco-Spain entente, Ahmad al-Mansur secretly maintained a close relationship with England. He was open to discussing the possibility of supporting Prince Don Antonio of Portugal in his claim to the Portuguese throne, particularly after the Spanish fleet, the Invincible Armada, was defeated by England's navy in 1588. Seizing the opportunity, Morocco engaged in discussions with Queen Elizabeth I and became involved in the English plan to restore Don Antonio to the throne. This collaboration contributed to the English attempt to invade Portugal in 1589.[23]

Ahmad al-Mansur was more interested in an alliance with England than with Spain because he sought English support in Morocco's ambitions to contribute to voyages of discovery.[24] He recognized the potential benefits of setting alliance with a powerful maritime nation like England, whose naval capabilities could help Morocco in exploring new territories. This alliance would help Morocco expand its influence and engage in the global exchange of goods, knowledge, and culture. Ahmad al-Mansur's focus on England reflected his strategic vision of positioning Morocco as an active participant in the broader world of exploration and trade.

During Ahmad al-Mansur's reign, Morocco played a pivotal role in the historical events and developments of the 16th century. Its strategic ports and powerful fleets contributed significantly to the era's geographical discoveries. Morocco's involvement in maritime activities, whether through direct exploration or supporting European voyages, helped shape the course of global exploration and trade. The nation's role during this period underscores its influence in the broader context of the Age of Discovery as an important player in the shifting dynamics of the time.

4.2 Morocco and International Trade

In the 16th century, Morocco held a strategic position in international trade, connecting Africa, Europe and America. Its wealth in valuable resources, such as sugar, gold, copper, and leather, attracted states eager to secure profitable exchanges. Moroccan ports bustled with activity as traders from Spain, Portugal, and the Ottoman Empire sought its goods. The country's position along major trade routes allowed it to influence commerce and diplomacy. These geopolitical qualities made it a powerful player in the economic and political affairs of the time.

Thus, Morocco's coastal cities and ports, along with its capital Marrakesh, became vibrant centers of trade and diplomacy. Merchants from Spain, England, and other European nations flocked to these hubs to secure Moroccan goods and establish lucrative partnerships. Beyond trade, they took part in political affairs, formed alliances with local rulers, and at times influenced key decisions. These exchanges shaped Morocco's relations with European powers and combined commerce with diplomacy during a period of intense international competition.

During Ahmad al-Mansur's reign, Moroccan merchants controlled the trade of precious metals, including gold and copper, which came from Sub-Saharan Africa or local mines. They supplied these valuable resources to European traders, who relied on Moroccan partners to access them. Spanish, English, and Portuguese merchants secured these metals and transported them to European markets.[25] This exchange strengthened Morocco's economy, increased its influence in regional trade, and deepened its connections with European powers, who sought stable and profitable commercial ties.

In addition to the metal trade, Morocco became a major producer of high-quality sugar, cultivated in the fertile Suss fields near Marrakesh during Moulay Ahmad's era. Moroccan sugar gained a strong reputation in European markets, particularly in England, where the royal court valued it for its superior quality.[26] As such, English merchants established trade agreements with Moroccan suppliers, ensuring a steady flow of sugar to meet the growing demand among European elites and wealthy households.

The flourishing trade between Morocco and foreign merchants in the late the 16th century led to the creation of notable trade companies, such as the Barbary Company. English and other European traders sought to establish formal structures to regulate commerce, secure exclusive trading rights, and strengthen their economic presence in North Africa. These companies facilitated the exchange of goods, including sugar, gold, and leather, while also serving as intermediaries in political negotiations between Moroccan rulers and European governments.

Morocco established strong and prosperous trade links with England, where Moroccan traders supplied sugar, molasses, dates, almonds, wax, ivory, and goatskin to their English counterparts. In exchange, English merchants exported cloth, textiles, and weapons, which were highly valued in Morocco. These durable commercial relations between Morocco and England led to the

[23] Ibid., pp. 83-84.
[24] Ibid., p. 79.
[25] Ibid., p. 74.
[26] Mercedes Garcia-Arenal*, Ahmad al-Mansur: The Beginnings of Modern Morocco,* p. 73

creation of the Barbary Company in 1585, which managed trade operations between the two countries. Notably, some company traders maintained close connections with the Sultan and played significant diplomatic roles.[27]

In sum, by the 16th century, Morocco played a crucial role in international trade, holding a respected status through diverse partnerships and successful mediation between Africa, Europe, and the East. Its strategic location, along with its wealth in valuable commodities such as gold, sugar, and leather, made it a key hub for commerce. Moroccan rulers and merchants skillfully managed political and economic relationships that allowed them to guarantee profitable trade agreements and maintain strong connections with powerful European nations. This strengthened Morocco's position as a major actor in global markets with enhanced economic and political influence.

4.3 Conquest and Discovery

Ahmad al-Mansur was an ambitious ruler who sought to expand Morocco's influence both north and south. His desire to conquer Sudan was not merely for territorial gain but also to control its rich gold mines, which he saw as a vital resource for his broader ambitions. He aimed to strengthen his empire and gather the necessary wealth and power by securing these economic and strategic assets for a potential campaign to reclaim Al-Andalus. Therefore, Ahmad al-Mansur sent an armed force to conquer the Songhay kingdom of Gao and Timbuktu in 1591.[28] Also, after the English and Dutch took control of Cadiz in 1596 and after Philip II died in 1598, Ahmad al-Mansur looked forward to invading the peninsula once again. He sent many letters to Eastern scholars in Egypt and Mecca asking them for prayers.[29]

Ahmad al-Mansur was acutely aware of Morocco's vulnerability between the expanding Spanish Empire to the north and the Ottoman Empire to the east. To secure his kingdom's independence and economic prosperity, he sought to establish an Atlantic presence and even explored opportunities in the New World. One of his most ambitious efforts was the proposed alliance with England's Elizabeth I, which included discussions about joint military expeditions to the Americas. Al-Mansur also considered establishing a Moroccan colony in present-day Brazil or the Caribbean, hoping to replicate the success of European powers in exploiting New World resources. However, despite his diplomatic overtures and strategic vision, Morocco lacked the naval power and logistical infrastructure to compete with established colonial empires like Spain, Portugal, and later the Dutch. Unlike the Dutch, who successfully seized parts of Brazil (such as Pernambuco) in the early 17th century and disrupted Morocco's sugar trade by flooding European markets with cheaper Brazilian sugar, al-Mansur's ambitions remained unrealized.[30]

The failure to secure a foothold in the Americas had long-term consequences for Morocco. The Dutch conquest of Brazil in the 1630s marked a turning point, as their efficient sugar production undercut Morocco's once-lucrative sugar industry, which had been a key source of wealth for the Saadi dynasty. Without colonies to provide alternative revenue or strategic depth, Morocco remained economically and militarily constrained, unable to fully resist European encroachment or Ottoman influence. Al-Mansur's inability to expand into the Atlantic world also left Morocco dependent on trans-Saharan trade routes, which were increasingly vulnerable to European interference. In contrast, the Dutch not only profited from their New World ventures but also used their gains to strengthen their global position, further marginalizing Morocco. Thus, while al-Mansur's foresight was remarkable, his lack of success in colonization underscored the challenges faced by non-European powers in the age of empire.
New chat

5. Discussion

M. G. Arenal's dissertation on periodization primarily explored the deep connections between Morocco and Europe in the 16th century, highlighting how their histories were intertwined. Her arguments drew from the political and economic developments that shaped the world during that era and focused on how shifts in trade, diplomacy, and military strategies influenced both regions. She examined the impact of colonial expansion, the competition for resources, and the shifting balance of power. Similarly, Arenal emphasized Morocco's strategic role in global affairs and its interactions with European nations during a time of significant transformation, revealing the complex dynamics that defined the period.

Morocco may belong to the Modern Age, relying on its presence in the historical world scene, yet this standard alone is insufficient. Indeed, the concept of the Modern Age overtakes this standard as we cleared above, and involves major internal structural changes, concerning cultural, social, economic, and political structures. Hence, despite Morocco's significant role in the

[27] Ibid., pp. 81, 82.
[28] Ibid., pp. 97, 98.
[29] Ibid., pp. 87, 88.
[30] Ibid., pp. 95, 96.

16th century world events, and active partaking with the world powers at this time, domestic structures from the Medieval Age persisted into the so-called "Modern Age" with little change. For instance, the political order prevailing in Morocco in the "Modern Age" pseudo, was the same as that of the Middle Ages. The same observations apply to other historical aspects, such as economic, societal, and cultural developments.

On the other hand, the Modern Age in Europe did not depend factually on its ties to political and economic developments in world history during the 16th century. More importantly, it emerged from the significant advancements that European countries experienced within their own societies. Transformations took place on social, economic, political, and cultural levels in a way that determined the foundations of modern European states. Innovations in governance, shifts in economic structures, and the rise of new intellectual movements played crucial roles. These internal changes, combined with Europe's interactions with the wider world, contributed to the region's progress and influence in the centuries that followed.

Indeed, some scholars, especially those focusing on Morocco's history, are conscious of the shortcomings the Western vision of periodization faces. Mohamed Houbaida**,** a notable Moroccan historian, is one of the prominent scholars who discussed the epistemological problem of periodization in his article "The Periodization and Writing in Morocco History" (Houbaida, 2023) and steered different criticisms of the Western perspective. Houbaida argues that the historical periodization that global historical studies undergo does not suit Moroccan history. Almost all historical indications that Western historians claim to express the Modern Age's changes, largely vanish within the context of Morocco. Thus, the efforts of Western historians over the past century are often inappropriate and involve some negative value judgments regarding the histories of non-Western nations.[31]

Houbaida did not halt by the criticisms of the Western periodization perspective but looked forward to proposing an alternative periodisation approach aligned with Morocco's history and its substantial changes. He rejected M. G. Arenal's time division about the Modern Age, considering that true start of the Modern Age in Morocco was primarily linked to the Protectorate Treaty (1912). According to Houbaida, before becoming part of the colonial system in the early 20th century, Morocco remained in a prolonged medieval period and showed no clear signs of transitioning toward modernity or the Modern Age.

Based on this perspective, Houbaida proposes a new approach to periodization, believing it offers a more accurate and effective way to interpret Morocco's history. His framework introduces two key concepts: the Classical Middle Ages, covering the 15th and 16th centuries, and the Late Middle Ages**,** spanning from the 16th century to the establishment of the protectorate period.[32] He argues that this division better reflects Morocco's historical trajectory, which did not align with Europe's path toward modernity. Instead, Morocco remained in an extended medieval period, shaped by its own political, economic, and social dynamics, until colonial intervention forced a transformation.

We believe Houbaida's proposal is significant and effectively addresses the periodization dilemma in Moroccan history as an epistemological issue centered on the concept of change. However, he does not fully resolve the problem of the value assigned to periodization, as he overlooks the inherent a priori judgments embedded in the Western perspective. While his approach offers an alternative framework, it does not entirely escape the influence of existing historical narratives. This matter leaves room for further critical reflection on how historical time is structured and understood.

It is not easy for a Moroccan historian to accept the notion that the Middle Ages represented a period of decline, as Western historians like Petrarch once claimed for Europe, especially given the substantial evidence pointing to Morocco's progress and prosperity during this time. Unlike the narrative of stagnation often associated with the medieval period in Europe, Morocco experienced significant advancements in various areas, including architecture, trade, science, and culture. The period saw the flourishing of cities like Fez and Marrakesh, the growth of intellectual life, and the strengthening of political institutions. These developments challenge the traditional Western view of the Middle Ages as a time of decline.

To encapsulate, it becomes evident that the connection to and participation in world events that M. G. Arenal centered on are insufficient standards to prove any history's affiliation to the Modern Age, including Morocco's. In this vein, we should focus on structural and insider factors as criteria. Morocco's history, for instance, presents a clear example that defies M. G. Arenal's periodization model and demonstrates its limit, where the entire historical domestic structure remained intact until the protectorate period (1912).

6. Conclusion

The issue of periodization in historiography is often criticized as a teleological and Eurocentric construct, imposing Western historical frameworks onto non-European societies in ways that distort their unique developmental trajectories. Scholars like

[31] Mohamed Houbaida, The Periodization and Writing of Morocco's History, pp. 11-13.
[32] Ibid., pp. 13, 14.

Mohamed Houbaida argue that conventional periodization—particularly the tripartite division into Ancient, Medieval, and Modern eras—reflects value judgments that marginalize non-European histories, such as Morocco's, by framing them as "backward" or "delayed" in comparison to Europe. For example, labeling Morocco's early modern era as the "late Middle Ages" implicitly suggests stagnation, failing to account for the region's dynamic political, economic, and intellectual shifts during the same period. This approach not only disregards indigenous historical narratives but also reinforces a hierarchical worldview where Europe serves as the universal benchmark of progress. The very notion of a "Modern Age" presupposes a rupture with feudalism and the rise of capitalism, secularism, and the nation-state—phenomena that did not unfold identically (or at all) in Morocco. Thus, the uncritical application of these categories risks reducing Moroccan history to a footnote in Europe's march toward modernity, obscuring its own innovations, such as the consolidation of the Saadi dynasty, trans-Saharan trade networks, or the intellectual flourishing of Sufi scholarly networks.

Houbaida's critique highlights the theoretical contradictions inherent in forcing Morocco's history into Eurocentric periodization models. The proposed alternative—replacing the "Modern Age" with a prolonged "late Middle Ages"—creates its own problems, as it either necessitates an awkward leap to the "Contemporary" period or demands subdivisions (e.g., "early/late modern") that merely replicate the original framework's biases. This results in a periodization model riddled with confusion, as it fails to articulate what, if anything, distinguishes Morocco's "late Middle Ages" from its "early modern" or "contemporary" eras. For instance, the 16th-century Saadi expansion into West Africa and diplomatic engagements with Europe defy categorization as "medieval," just as the 19th-century reforms of Sultan Moulay Hassan resist classification as "modern" without contextualizing them within global imperial pressures. The deeper issue, then, is not merely terminological but epistemological: periodization itself assumes a linear, universal progression that ill fits societies with discontinuous or divergent historical rhythms. Instead, historians of Morocco might abandon rigid Eurocentric phases altogether, adopting flexible frameworks that prioritize local turning points—such as the rise of sharifian dynasties or the encroachment of colonialism—to better capture the region's historical specificity. Only then can periodization serve as a tool for understanding, rather than erasing, the complexities of non-European pasts.

Moroccan historians nowadays should revise the periodization heritage and dare to propose other models that overtake the Western framework and are suitable for Moroccan history at the same time. For instance, the tripartite division of Moroccan history (Ancient, Middle Ages, and Modern Age…) has become an insignificant division, just a mere nominal practice imitating others' cognitive traditions. In return, we prefer to use another form of periodization including: Before Islam, the Principalities Age, the Great States Age, the Confrontations Age, the Colonial Age, and the Independent Age.

The revision does more than correct terminological inadequacies; it fundamentally reorients historiography toward Morocco's own benchmarks of change. For example, the "Great States Age" underscores how imperial legitimacy (e.g., Almohad caliphal claims or Saadi jihad against Portuguese incursions) shaped Morocco's sovereignty in ways incomparable to European feudalism or modernity. Similarly, the "Confrontations Age" (15th–19th centuries) captures Morocco's active role in Mediterranean and Atlantic power struggles, resisting reduction to a "late medieval" backwater. Such a model also exposes the violence of colonial periodization, which often treats the "Modern Age" as a gift bestowed by Europe, erasing precolonial statecraft and intellectual traditions. By embracing this schema, historians could not only dismantle the ideological baggage of Western periodization but also illuminate continuities—like the enduring role of *Sharifian* authority—that defy Eurocentric rupture narratives. The task now is to theorize these periods rigorously, grounding them in archival and interdisciplinary research to forge a truly autonomous Moroccan historiography.

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