



Rivalry over trade, land, and guns: The English Folly 1661-1684

The year is 1661. There is no international maritime law. Whoever controls the mouth of the Mediterranean gains access to immense power and wealth. The seas and land around Tangier are teeming with rivals.

When English King Charles II marries Princess Catherine de Braganza, he receives the Portuguese port of Tangier as part of her dowry. The Spanish and the Dutch are angry. So is the sultan, Moulay Ismail, and his local rival, Ghailan.

Wenceslas Hollar goes to Tangier in 1668 to sketch the king's new domain. His pictures show ships sailing into the fine harbor. The British troops labor long and hard to lay down a massive stone breakwater called 'the Mole' to provide shelter from storms and attack. They also build forts in the nearby hills to protect the little walled city against raids by 'Moors'. They try to grow crops just beyond the city walls to feed their hungry garrison.

These forts anger both the sultan and Ghailan. They find them shameful. Their attacks make holding onto Tangier expensive for the English. Moulay Ismail sends a diplomat to London to negotiate a truce (1682). His ambassador -- Ben Haddou, pictured here -- is celebrated by English society.

The sultan does not like the terms of Ben Haddou's truce and resolves to start attacking Tangier again. The English parliament refuses to pay the bills to defend the embattled port.

The English leave, destroying the mole they labored fifteen years to build. Moulay Ismail regrets they did not sell the mole to him: he says he would have made it available to English ships returning from India. Why does the sultan want to befriend his former enemy? One important answer: Moulay Ismail, like his vanquished rival Ghailan, wants to buy English gunpowder and muskets.

To learn more, read chapter 3 of Enchantment.

Felix Mathews: U.S. Consul 1869-1887, 1890-1893

The life of Tangier-born Felix Mathews puts on vivid display the mix of nationalities in nineteenth century Tangier. The child of a Spanish father and a Gibraltarian mother, Mathews traveled to the US in 1833, became a citizen, and in 1870 was appointed US consul back in his birthplace. His descendants married into local French and Portuguese families. Here you see his son Jasper, who followed him as consul, and his daughter, Concessa, wearing a Jewish costume for a fancy-dress party.

While serving as consul, Mathews, like many other diplomats, frequently came under attack for selling 'protection' to wealthy Tanjavis: a 'protected' person did not have to pay taxes to the sultan, could renounce his local debts, and could not be prosecuted in a Muslim court. By 1877 Mathews was rumored to have 'protected' 100 local people, despite the fact that Tangier had no trade with the US and only one resident US citizen. In 1888 he 'protected' a village of 300 because he employed them as 'beaters' during pig-sticking hunts. Despite his low pay, Mathews was able to buy land on the fashionable 'Mountain' and build a fine home there.

Here you see a document attesting to the 'protected' status of one man in 1917. The Moroccan king was happy to see 'protection' disappear in 1925 at the beginning of the International Zone: it had diminished his government's revenue and prestige.

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