

Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast, I'm your host Allison Tyra and today we're talking about Moroccan pirate and ruler Sayyida al Hurra.

Born into a prominent Muslim family in Granada in 1485, Sayyida fled the Spanish Reconquista in 1492. Her family resettled in northwest Morocco; she was highly educated and at 16 was married to her father's friend, a man 30 years her senior. The Moroccan sultan had granted her husband the opportunity to rebuild the ruins of Tetouan, which had been destroyed by the Spanish. Sayyida served as a de facto vice governor, ruling in his stead when he traveled. When her husband died in 1515, the residents were used to seeing her in charge and accepted her as the new governor.

But while she was a noblewoman and politician, she was also a pirate, or corsair. She never forgave the Spanish for forcing her family to flee Granada and to avenge herself on her "Christian enemy," she reached out to the legendary Ottoman admiral Hayrettin Barbarossa of Algiers. While Barbarossa trawled the eastern Mediterranean, Sayyida proved herself a scourge in the western Mediterranean, Iberia and Morocco's Atlantic coast. She led her fleet, preying on Spanish and Portuguese shipping lanes. She amassed a large fortune from both the loot and ransoming captives and was seen as the Europeans' main contact to negotiate the release of Christian captives.

After 25 years of widowhood, Sayyida accepted a marriage proposal from the Moroccan sultan. Their marriage is the only recorded instance of a Moroccan sultan marrying outside of the capital - Sayyida insisted he come to her in Tetouan because she had no intention of giving up ruling her city and she wanted everyone to know it. Unfortunately, the following year, she was overthrown by her son-in-law and stripped of her property and power after four decades in Tetouan.

Accepting her fate, al Hurra retired to her childhood home in northwest Morocco, where she lived almost two decades more.

Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.