

## The Abencerrages: between history and legend

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In the Alhambra, the royal palace of the Nasrid emirs – the Muslim rulers of Granada in the late Middle Ages – near the famous Court of the Lions, there is a hall known as the ‘Hall of the Abencerrages’ (Sala de los Abencerrajes). A fountain with dark stains can be seen there. According to tradition, these were left by the blood of the members of the famous lineage, executed on the orders of Sultan Abu al-Hassan Ali (1464-82). Who were these Abencerrages and what is their history? And how did they come to occupy a privileged position in the imagination of early French Romanticism?



The first page of the libretto of the opera by Étienne de Jouy and Luigi Cherubini tells us that ‘The scene is set in Granada, in the Alhambra (palace of the Moorish kings), towards the middle of the fifteenth century, during the reign of Muley-Hassem’. The protagonists of the drama include Almanzor (a Moorish general of the Abencerrage tribe), Alémar (a vizier of the Zegrí tribe), Kaled (a Moorish officer and chief of the Zegrí tribe) and Noraïme (a royal princess). The story tells of the love between Almanzor and Noraïme (who is also coveted by Alémar) and the efforts of the Zegrí to destroy their enemy. Political sentiment and intrigue of the kind so dear to the Romantic sensibility of the nineteenth century are

garnished by a touch of orientalism, since Muslim Granada is the incarnation of the Orient on the European continent. That image is perfectly suited to the needs of the operatic drama and the taste of the time, but has little connection with the historical reality as we know it today.

The first respect in which the nineteenth-century authors diverge from history is the conception of the Abencerrages and the Zegrí as 'tribes'. It is true that this type of social organisation was found in the territories of early Islam, particularly in the Iberian peninsula. However, around the fifteenth century, in the crisis-ridden Kingdom of Granada, these ancient forms of community disintegrated to a significant extent. It is also difficult to consider the two groups as power-holding families within the Nasrid emirate. The Zegrí never constituted a genuine lineage: *zegrí*, from the Arabic word *tagri*, means simply 'frontiersman'. In reality, it is a nickname adopted by some Maghrebi chiefs, the best-known being Ahmad al-Tagri ('El Zegrí' in Christian chronicles), who played a decisive role in the final defence of Málaga against the Castilian assault of 1487.

Nevertheless, during the civil struggles that devastated fifteenth century Granada, it is indeed possible to distinguish two factions, the origins of which lay in differing conceptions of the legitimacy of political power. The Abencerrage side comprised the Banu al-Sarray (Abencerrajes in Spanish), the Banu Kumasha (Abencomixa) and the Banu Mufariy (Monfaraches); while the opposing camp, which called itself 'legitimist', consisted of the Banu al-Amin (Alamines) and the Banu Bannigas (Venegas). All these families shared the same political, economic and cultural space: they constituted a genuine aristocracy of officials at the heart of the power centres of the Nasrid Emirate. But what were the roots of the confrontation between them?

The presence of members of the clan of the Banu al-Sarray (the 'sons of the saddler' in Arabic) in Málaga is documented during the reign of the Hammudi dynasty, which succeeded the Umayyad dynasty of caliphs of al-Andalus in the eleventh century. By the thirteenth century, when the Nasrid sultanate was already established, they are to be found in Almería and Granada, while in the mid-fourteenth century they appear in Ronda.

However, their political role did not develop in the Nasrid capital until the fifteenth century; before that, they had been military chiefs in the border districts of the territory. Their rise coincided with a number of coups d'état fomented by members of the Nasrid dynasty. After the death of Yusuf II – poisoned in 1392 – his younger son, Muhammad VII (1392-1408), imprisoned his elder brother, the rightful heir to the throne, and ordered the execution of his father's vizier, Ibn Zamrak. During his reign, the Abencerrages began to interfere in the internal politics of the emirate, although it would be more accurate to speak of the power of certain individuals or families rather than that of the entire lineage.

After Muhammad VII was assassinated in 1408 and his legitimate heir was removed from government, Muhammad's brother Yusuf III ascended the throne of the Alhambra. He died in 1417 and was succeeded by a child, Muhammad VIII, known as 'the Little One' (*el Pequeño*) for this reason. Two years later, in 1419, the Abencerrages, led by Abu-l-Hayyay Yusuf ibn al-Sarray, provoked a further coup d'état on behalf of his father's cousin, Muhammad IX 'the Left-handed' (*al-Aysar* in Arabic), then imprisoned in Salobreña. Although he was freed and designated as the new emir, he was unable to enter the Nasrid capital. However, the Abencerrages managed to obtain from the muftis (the jurisconsults who interpreted Islamic law) a fatwa (legal ruling) declaring Muhammad VIII's reign illegitimate because he was a minor. The young emir was imprisoned and his vizier executed. Given the role that the Abencerrages played in his rise to power, it is not surprising to learn that during the reign of Muhammad IX, some members of the lineage assumed governmental responsibilities and played a prominent political role.

As has already been mentioned, the Abencerrages were in fact the leaders of a faction comprising several clans, while the opposition included others who championed what they believed to be the legitimate order, which in their view had been flouted. The fierce conflict between the two camps led to dethronements, restorations, rebellions and assassinations, which have been interpreted as a struggle between two conceptions of power: that of the Abencerrages, seeking to impose a political strategy

founded on respect for their military strength and group privileges, and that of the 'legitimists', who wanted respect for the law and an equilibrium between the clans resident at the Nasrid court in the Alhambra.

It may easily be imagined that the Abencerrage faction became a troublesome presence to the emirs they backed, who were, in a sense, prisoners of the clan's support and its power. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Amir Abu Nasr Sa'd (1454-64) sought an excuse to break free of their tutelage. His chance came with the military incursion of the Constable Miguel Lucas de Iranzo, governor of the city of Jaén, on the border between Castile and Granada. In 1462 Iranzo attacked the Cenebe region, in the heart of the Emirate, meeting with no resistance. The population of the Nasrid capital was incensed: it paid very high contributions – illegal in Islamic doctrine – to ensure the defence of the realm. The Abencerrage faction was suspected of enriching itself without providing protection in return. Sultan Sa'd seized this opportunity and ordered the execution of the vizier Ali Surur Mufarray and the chief Yusuf ibn al-Sarray. Only the intervention of his son and heir, Prince Abu al-Hasan Ali, prevented a veritable massacre, since Sa'd had planned to execute other members of their party as well. This episode inspired a popular belief about the slaughter of the Abencerrages, whose blood was supposed to have stained the fountain mentioned in the introduction to this article: this is the origin of the name given to the hall in the Alhambra since the sixteenth century, after the city had fallen to the Christians.

The Abencerrages then fled to Málaga, where they organised opposition to Sultan Sa'd and supported the proclamation of his cousin Yusuf V (who had already reigned over Granada in 1445-46). The latter, during this brief second reign, temporarily succeeded in seizing the Nasrid capital. The failure of his coup and his death the following year did not put an end to the ambitions of the Abencerrages. Henry IV of Castile took advantage of the prevalent disorder and power vacuum to conquer Gibraltar and Archidona in 1462, causing great unease among the Muslim population. Sa'd's actions to restore the royal treasury, ruined by these events, offered the ultimate pretext to regroup the opposition

around the crown prince, who dethroned his father with the support of the Abencerrages. This was how Abu al-Hasan Ali became Emir of Granada (1464-83). The Christian chronicles call him Muley Hacén: the 'Muley-Hassem' of De Jouy's libretto. During his reign, the Nasrid Emirate enjoyed relative calm, barely interrupted by local revolts, sometimes encouraged by the Abencerrages, such as the one in 1470, which ended with the execution of the rebels. Finally, the Abencerrages helped the last Muslim ruler of Granada, Muhammad XI, known as 'Boabdil', to dethrone his father Abu al-Hasan Ali in 1483. After the fall of the Emirate and the Christian conquest of 1492, their name became the stuff of legend.



Here, then, is a reconstruction of the historical reality of the Abencerrages and the Zegrí who feature in Cherubini's opera. However, almost none of the characters in the plot can be identified by examining the entourage of Muley Hacén. The name of the protagonist Almanzor – *al-Mansur*, 'the conqueror' in Arabic – recalls the nickname of the famous military and political leader of the tenth century, when the Caliphate of Córdoba was at its height (a period during which another French opera was set: Charles Gounod's *Le Tribut de Zamora* of 1881). As for Alémar, the Zegrí chief, his name recalls the nickname *al-Ahmar* ('the Red') by which the founder of the Nasrid dynasty, Muhammad ibn Yusuf ibn Nasr (1194-1273), was known. Only 'Gonzalve de Cordoue' is a historical figure: Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, the famous 'Gran Capitán' of the Italian Wars of the early sixteenth century; but he plays a secondary – though decisive – role in the plot. So where does this story come from?

The Christian conquest of the Emirate of Granada made it necessary for the Castilian victors to get to know the conquered population, their customs and their civilisation. As a result, numerous historical and literary texts enriched the tradition of frontier romances, which had already shown signs of a fascination with the Muslim enemy from the late Middle Ages onwards. There is no lack of allusions to the Abencerrages in these

writings. The echoes of their execution are used to predict the fall of the sultanate as a form of poetic justice laced with a touch of tragedy, in which the protagonist was seen as a sacrificial hero. Northern Europe was also familiar with the aura of Nasrid Granada: the Burgundian nobleman Ghillebert de Lannoy, who visited the emirate in 1410, left a vivid impression of it in his writings.

Specialists place the origin of the legend of the Abencerrages in two literary works from sixteenth-century Spain. The first is a novel whose hero is an Abencerrage. We possess several versions of this text, quite similar to each other and published in the space a few years. They probably derive from oral transmission of a single, older subject. The title of one of these publications is particularly suggestive: *El Abencerraje* (1565). All the versions agree in portraying a young Abencerrage lord in love with a beautiful lady whom he wishes to marry in secret. Taken prisoner by a Castilian nobleman, he is later set free on account of his nobility of spirit: the Abencerrages are all knights of sublime ideals, model courtiers loyal to the crown and to Islamic law; as a result, they are unjustly persecuted by cruel enemies and falsely accused. The process of idealisation is clear: it attains its most perfect expression in the masterpiece of Ginés Pérez de Hita, a novelist from the Kingdom of Murcia – an ancient region bordering Granada – who lived between 1544 and 1619. All these elements are to be found in the plot of Cherubini's opera.

Pérez de Hita's *Historia de los bandos de los Zegríes y Abencerrajes, caballeros moros de Granada* (History of the factions of the Zegrí and the Abencerrages, Moorish knights of Granada), the first part of which was published in 1595, set in stone the image of the Abencerrages and the outlines of their legend. The title itself announces the main thread of the plot: a 'knightly' rivalry that constitutes an undeniable distortion of the historical reality as it has just been described. We also learn of the virtues and faults of each of the clans: the Abencerrages are generous and of glorious ancestry; the Zegrí are not lacking in courage, but are plagued by moral flaws such as envy and jealousy. Masters of cunning and slander, they accuse the richest and most powerful Abencerrage of

disloyalty to the King of Granada and of having seduced the Queen (we may note the Christianisation of the royal titles here). This treachery leads to the exile of the Abencerrages, who then abjure the Muslim faith to embrace Christianity. Underlying this is the notion that there exist 'good' and 'bad' Muslims. Hence, pushing the logic to its conclusion, the Abencerrages become 'Spanish Moors', as is demonstrated by their virtues and their ability to conclude treaties with the Christians.

The legend of the Abencerrages was very popular in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain and is reflected in such writers as Lope de Vega. None of them, however, eclipsed the triumph of Ginés Pérez de Hita, whose novel was reprinted more than thirty times, even after the publication of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605) ridiculing the novels of chivalry, this 'Moorish' variant of which is too readily forgotten nowadays.



This rich literary tradition was not confined to the Iberian peninsula. Indeed, it can be found in several western European works from the sixteenth century onwards. We need go further here than France. In the salon of the Marquise de Rambouillet, Vincent Voiture – who called himself 'el Rey Chiquito' (the little king), as Muhammad XI 'Boabdil' was known – promoted the 'Tale of Abindarraez the Beautiful Xarifa', which was inserted in Jorge de Montemayor's novel *La Diana*. A lover of Spanish Morisco novels and romances, Voiture encouraged the publication of the first French novel of Hispano-Muslim inspiration. This was the interminable *Almahide ou l'esclave reine* (1660-63) by Georges de Scudéry. A few years later, this work indisputably influenced *Zayde, histoire espagnole* (1669-71), written in her elegant style by the famous Madame de La Fayette, which already foreshadowed the features of the modern psychological novel that she was to further to refine in *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678). The protagonist is a Spanish count – a certain Gonsalve – in love with a Muslim princess, Zayde. Ginés Pérez de Hita's novel had been published in French

for the first time in 1608, and a new translation by Mlle de la Roche Guilhen appeared in 1683.

All these works opened the way for the most famous French historical novel in the Moorish tradition: *Gonzalve de Cordoue ou Grenade reconquise. Précédé d'un Précis historique sur les Maures d'Espagne*. This was published in 1791 by Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian, now known chiefly as a writer of fables; he came from Languedoc, and his interest in the subject can be explained by the fact that he had a Spanish mother. Taking as his protagonist Don Gonzalo de Córdoba, one of the most renowned military leaders of the final war of conquest (1482-92), he places him in a number of imaginary episodes, including the story of Abindarraez. This was the juncture at which the Castilian knight and our Abencerrages finally met up, and provided the starting point for the libretto Étienne de Jouy presented to Luigi Cherubini for his new opera.



Until the publication of this CD-book, there had been no detailed study of the genesis and destiny of Cherubini's *Les Abencérages*. Apart from a few mentions in the general literature, the only source of reference was a pioneering article by Jean Mongrédien, 'À la découverte des *Abencérages* de Luigi Cherubini (1813)', published in 1986 and reproduced in this book. There the French musicologist lamented the paucity of information available on the subject. Aside from a few inaccuracies concerning the historical truth of the libretto, which we have tried to clarify here, his reflections, however provisional they may have been at the time, still offer a very useful starting point.

Several documents in the Archives Nationales show that De Jouy and Cherubini began collaborating on this work as early as 1810. The commissioning body of the Opéra unanimously accepted the subject of the new score, even though the imperial censor requested a few corrections to the original work by Ginés Pérez de Hita. For example, all references to 'Spaniards' had to be removed: the painful memories and the unpromising



course of the ongoing Peninsular War (1808-14), combined with the political incidents linked to the performance of Spontini's *Fernand Cortez* at the Opéra (1809), made these changes imperative. The 'Spanish warriors' were transformed into 'Christian knights', even though they only appear in the celebrations of the first act and are simply mentioned later when the victory of the Muslims is announced, as De Jouy explained to the general secretary of the Opéra in a letter of 13 December 1812. It is true that today we no longer speak in these terms: we speak of the Castilians and the Aragonese, not the Spaniards. At that time, however, when the modern state as we know it was emerging with the identification and development of nation-states, European nationalists referred to 'Spain' and the 'Spanish nation' even for the medieval period, when the Iberian peninsula was divided into several kingdoms: the Kingdom of Portugal, the Crown of Castile, the Crown of Aragon, the Kingdom of Navarre and the Nasrid Emirate of Granada, the last remaining Muslim political regime on Spanish soil in the fifteenth century.

One aspect that Mongrédien emphasises is the virtual absence in the libretto of conflicts of race and culture, which would have provided the work with additional interest for audiences of the time. Chateaubriand showed a shrewder understanding of this in his novella *Les Aventures du dernier Abencerrage*, written in 1807 but not published until 1826. Its protagonists – the 'last Abencerrage' of the title and a Christian noblewoman – renounce their impossible love. For relations between Christians and Iberian Muslims would indeed have been impossible in this historical context. Nevertheless, the twists and turns of the plot, caused by the breaking of truces, however dramatic and excessive they may seem, perfectly reflect the fluctuations of life on the frontier, which could be radically disrupted at any moment. But, as we know, the rules of operatic drama do not often coincide with scholarly veracity. Indeed, some of the 'flaws' in the libretto work in favour of the opera's historical reality. Even if the presentation of the 'tribes' is more in keeping with the literary stereotypes through which contemporary Spain, and consequently France, viewed Granada's Islamic past, it does effectively reflect the political

disorder and the fierce struggle of rival factions. This is why Gonzalo de Córdoba's support for his Muslim friend should not surprise us. After all, we should recall the sincere friendship between Peter I of Castile and Muhammad V of Granada in the fourteenth century: the two rulers helped each other in their internal difficulties.

On the other hand, there is no point in looking for Muslim inflections in Cherubini's music: musical 'Alhambriism' is a chimera that exists only in the plots of operas set in the Emirate of Granada. So much may be seen in Nicolini's *Abenamet e Zoraida* (1805), Donizetti's *Zoraida di Granata* (1822, revised version 1824) and *Alahor in Granata* (1826), Meyerbeer's *L'esule di Granata* (1822), and Arrieta's *La conquista di Granata* (1850), which are all variations on the same subject – the novel by Florian, of which *Les Abencérages* by Étienne de Jouy and Luigi Cherubini is, without question, the most accomplished operatic adaptation.



Plate of costume designs for *Les Abencérages*:  
Mme Branchu (Noraïme), Mlle Armand (Égilone) and M. Bertin (Abdérème).  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Planche de costumes pour *Les Abencérages* :  
M<sup>me</sup> Branchu (Noraïme), M<sup>lle</sup> Armand (Égilone) et M. Bertin (Abdérème).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.