


## *Introduction: Crossings*

 IN 1514 King Manuel I of Portugal presented Pope Leo X with a white elephant from India. Paraded through the streets of Rome in an elaborate ceremony and named “Annone,” or Hanno, by welcoming Romans, the elephant represented to the pope the king’s intention to bring the realms that extended from North Africa to India into the Christian fold. Hanno survived in his pen for three years, a presence at public events and festivities and a favorite of the pope and the Roman populace. He was written about by poets, mythographers, and satirists, and imaged in drawings, paintings, and woodcuts; in fountain ornament, bas-relief, and majolica platter. Raphael designed his memorial fresco.<sup>1</sup>

In 1518 a Spanish pirate, fresh from successful raids against Muslim ships in the Mediterranean, presented the same pope with a captured North African traveler and diplomat from Fez named al-Hasan al-Wazzan. He would serve as a useful source of information, it was hoped, and as a symbol in the pope’s desired crusade against the Ottoman Turks and the religion of Islam. Had not the Turks been an increased threat to Christendom since their conquest of Constantinople

in 1453? The diplomat's arrival and imprisonment were noted in diaries and diplomatic correspondence. His baptism at St. Peter's fifteen months later was a grand ceremony. A librarian recorded his book-borrowing. But compared to Hanno, al-Hasan al-Wazzan's nine years in Italy went unrecorded by those who saw him, his presence unmemorialized by those whom he served or knew, his likeness not drawn and redrawn, his return to North Africa referred to only later and obliquely. Only a shred of his life remained in the memory of Europeans interested in Arabic letters and travel literature, to be passed on orally and reported years later.

In North Africa there are also baffling silences. During the years when al-Hasan al-Wazzan was serving as agent for the sultan of Fez in towns along Morocco's Atlantic coast, no mention of him was made by Portuguese military men and administrators in their chatty letters to King Manuel. During years when he had diplomatic duties in Cairo, no mention of him was made by a sharp-eyed observer who wrote in his journal of visitors to the court of the Mamluk rulers of Egypt and the Levant.

Yet al-Hasan al-Wazzan left behind in Italy several manuscripts, one of which, published in 1550, became a bestseller. Over the centuries his book attracted the curiosity of readers and scholars in many parts of the world. The mysteries about him and even his name began already with the first edition. Giovanni Battista Ramusio, the editor, entitled the book *La Descrittione dell'Africa* (The Description of Africa), called its author by his baptismal name, "Giovan Lioni Africano," and included a brief biography of him in his dedication. So he was known in the several subsequent editions of the book that were published in Venice as the first volume in Ramusio's series of *Navigations and Voyages*. And so he was known in the European translations that soon appeared: "Iean Leon, African [*sic*]" in French (1556); "Ioannes Leo Africanus" in Latin (1556); and "Iohn Leo, a More" in English (1600). Through the German translation (1805) of "Johann Leo der Africaner," his book continued to shape European visions of Africa, all the more strongly because it came from someone who had lived and traveled in those parts.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile a scholar at the Escorial library in Spain, himself a Maronite Christian from Syria, came upon an Arabic manuscript on

another topic by al-Wazzan. It bore both his Muslim and his Christian names, which the librarian included in his published catalogue (1760–70). A century later, when the *Description* was enshrined in the *Recueil de voyages* (Collection of Voyages) by the important French Orientalist Charles Schefer, an Arabic name appeared in the introduction; and in the classic Hakluyt Society series of travel literature in England, the title page proclaimed: "by Al-Hassan Ibn-Mohammed Al-Wezaz Al-Fasi, a Moor, baptized as Giovanni Leone, but better known as Leo Africanus."<sup>3</sup>

Still its author remained a shadowy figure. Then in the early decades of the twentieth century, a few scholars approached the book and the man in new ways. In the context of the new French "colonial sciences" concerning the geography, history, and ethnography of Africa, the young Louis Massignon did his Sorbonne thesis on Morocco in the early sixteenth century as it had been described by "Léon l'Africain." From a close reading of the text (a technique that would flower in his later great publications on Sufi mysticism and poetry), Massignon extracted what he could not only about the geography of Morocco but also about al-Wazzan's life and travels, especially about his sources and methods of observing and classifying. The frame of al-Wazzan's book was "very Europeanized," Massignon opined, but "its core was very Arabic." Massignon's study was published in 1906, an important moment in France's steps toward establishing its protectorate of Morocco.<sup>4</sup>

The historical geographer Angela Codazzi knew Massignon's book well and took seriously his hope that an original manuscript of al-Wazzan's book would one day be found. Close to the collections in Italy's libraries, in 1933 she could announce that she had located an Italian manuscript of *The Description of Africa*, and it did indeed differ from the later printed edition of Ramusio. At the same time, Giorgio Levi della Vida, a remarkable scholar of Semitic languages and literatures, was making discoveries as well. Excluded from university teaching in 1931 as an antifascist, he was invited to catalogue the Arabic manuscripts at the Vatican Library. He left for the United States in 1939—an act of safety for a Jew—but not before putting the finishing

touches on a book about the creation of the Oriental collections at the Vatican. Among its many riches, it had much to say about the reading, writing, and signing practices of al-Hasan al-Wazzan. Back in Italy after the war, Levi della Vida helped Codazzi interpret two manuscripts on other subjects that she had found by “Giovanni Leone Africano.”<sup>5</sup>

The last important colonial presentation of Jean-Léon l’Africain was a new French translation and commentary prepared by Alexis Épaulard. During years in Morocco as a physician and military officer with the French protectorate, Épaulard had become impressed with “the exceptional value,” both historical and geographical, of *The Description of Africa*. His book built upon the work of Massignon and Codazzi, without following their spirit. Épaulard used the Italian manuscript in Rome in 1939—and applauded Codazzi’s plan to publish it one day (alas, unfulfilled)—but his *Description* is an amalgam of translations from Ramusio, occasional translations from the manuscript, and a modernized version of the sixteenth-century French translation. He ignored the possibility that the differences between the texts could reveal larger differences in viewpoint and cultural sensibility.

Like Massignon’s book, the Épaulard edition confronted assertions made in the *Description* with evidence from outside its pages—from the distance between places to the unrolling of historical events—and corrected al-Wazzan when necessary. Geographical names were clarified, and Arab authors he cited were identified. To achieve this, Épaulard assembled a team of French scholars in sub-Saharan studies, two of them then based in Dakar at the Institut Français d’Afrique Noire, and consulted specialists in North African folklore and historiography. The notes are useful, but they did not address the question raised by Massignon about where the text or its author was positioned in regard to the world he was writing about and the world he was writing for. Differences were smoothed over again: Épaulard liked to think that “Jean Léon” had never left his Christian life in Italy.

Épaulard did not live to see the fulfillment of his project. The team finished it up, and the *Description* was published in Paris by the Institut

des Hautes Études Marocaines in 1956, three years after Morocco became an independent state.<sup>6</sup>

The Épaulard team had particularly envisaged their readers as historians of Africa, and soon scholars of sub-Saharan Africa began to have their say about al-Wazzan’s reliability as a witness. In the late decades of the century, specialists from Europe, Africa, and America compared his pages on Black Africa with other evidence and later accounts: some claimed he gave convincing, precious detail on little-known societies and kingdoms, others that he was reporting tall stories picked up in Timbuktu and had never traveled beyond its borders. Here a ruler verified, there a conquest found false, here a trading practice confirmed, there a fire mentioned by no one else but al-Wazzan. All these approaches—in worthy pursuit of “scrupulous care in handling” a primary source—broke the *Description* into fragments, rather than considering it as a whole or its author’s literary practices.<sup>7</sup>

While the Africanists were arguing, a new generation arose of post-colonial readers of al-Hasan al-Wazzan. Most important was Oumelbanine Zhiri, whose own travels took her from her native Morocco to France to the United States. Her 1991 book, *L’Afrique au miroir de l’Europe: Fortunes de Jean Léon l’Africain à la Renaissance*, showed what impact the printed editions of Jean Léon’s book had had on the European view of Africa’s peoples, landscapes, and past. Her scope was wide—literary books, history books, and geographies—as she detailed what European writers had taken from, reshaped, and sometimes ignored in the *Description*. She inserted the non-European world into the consciousness of the Renaissance in a new way. In contrast with earlier studies of European attitudes toward the Turks, where all the imaging came from the European side, Zhiri’s *Mirror* set up an interchange, with the North African Jean Léon making a difference. Zhiri has gone on to carry the story forward over the centuries and is now turning to issues in the manuscript itself.<sup>8</sup>

The second major study of Leo Africanus comes from a different part of the world and takes the story in different directions. Following

his years as a German career officer and diplomat in Morocco and Tunisia, Dietrich Rauchenberger plunged deeply into research on the intriguing al-Hasan al-Wazzan. Among other stops, his quest led him to the Africa manuscript in Rome, the basis of his big *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner* (1999). Rauchenberger recounted the life, writings, and Italian milieu of Johannes Leo and uncovered the little-known resonance of his work among German scholars. The force of Rauchenberger's study is its remarkable treatment of al-Wazzan's controversial pages on sub-Saharan Africa. He used the manuscript and its divergences from the printed editions to assess al-Wazzan's reliability as an observer and traveler and placed this assessment in a richly drawn picture of the sub-Saharan region and its peoples. He concluded by quoting approvingly one of the African specialists on Épaulard's team: "We are lucky that the work of Leo Africanus was directed to a European public in Europe. Had he written for an Arab public, many valuable details would doubtless have been left out because they would have been assumed known."<sup>9</sup>

Scholars in Arabic studies and Arab scholars based in Morocco have, in fact, increasingly turned to al-Hasan al-Wazzan and his Africa book. In 1995 Serafín Fanjul, a specialist in Arabic literature, translated anew a Ramusio edition of the *Description* into Spanish. In part he wanted to close the gap between Arabists and Europeanists; in part he wanted to claim "Juan León," who was born in Granada, and his book for the mixed "cultural patrimony" of Spain.<sup>10</sup>

Fanjul had his doubts about the sincerity of Juan León's conversion to Christianity, an act that was troubling from the beginning for scholars in Morocco. In a pioneering study of 1935, Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Hajwi described al-Hasan al-Wazzan as a captive, who had been constrained in his conversion, had always remained attached to his people and his religion, and had himself influenced the pope. Forty-five years later, in 1980, the first Arabic translation of al-Wazzan's Africa book was published in Rabat. Its translator, Muhammad Hajji, had defended his thesis at the Sorbonne on the intellectual life of Morocco in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries not long before and was now professor of history at the University of Rabat. Introducing his translation from

Épaulard's French, Hajji reclaimed al-Wazzan by insisting that he had feigned conversion to Christianity and that certain features of the *Description*, such as his use of the word "we," showed his continuing devotion to Islam.<sup>11</sup>

Such questions were recast at a Paris conference on "Léon l'Africain" in 2003, which brought together scholars from the Maghreb, Europe, and North America interested in this enigmatic figure. The task of reclaiming him for Morocco had become less sensitive by then. In part, the way had been cleared not by a scholarly text but by a widely read and lively novel, *Léon l'Africain* (1986), written by Amin Maalouf. Born in Lebanon into a family of mixed religious loyalties and much geographical outreach, Maalouf worked as a journalist for the Arab press and then, as the civil wars tore apart his native land, moved to France. There he completed his studies in economics and sociology, wrote for and edited *Jeune Afrique*, a periodical of African independence movements and newly formed states, and in 1983 brought out a book of readings—in French and Arabic editions—on the Crusades as viewed by the Arabs.

Three years later Maalouf found his voice as a historical novelist, writing in French about the Arab and Islamic past, and he created in Leo Africanus/al-Hasan a figure who perfectly represented his own way of rising above constrictive and exclusive identities of language, religion, and nation. "I come from no country, no city, no tribe," his hero says at the opening of the novel. "I am the son of the highway, my country is a caravan . . . all languages, all prayers belong to me." Of himself, Maalouf has said, "I claim all the cultural dimensions of my country of origin and those of my adopted country"; and again, "I come from a tribe which has been nomadic forever in a desert of worldwide dimensions. Our countries are oases that we leave when the water dries up . . . We are linked to each other, across the generations, across the seas, across the Babel of languages only by the murmur of a name." Routes, not roots: in *Léon l'Africain*, Maalouf saw a figure from his Mediterranean past who combined its "multiple cultures."<sup>12</sup>

Historians might find Maalouf's portrait of al-Wazzan somewhat free-floating in its facile accretion of tastes, stances, and sensibilities, but

it opened the door to new questions. At the 2003 colloquium, colleagues from the Maghreb had varied views on al-Wazzan's cultural placement, but all thought it an issue to confront. The philosopher Ali Benmakhlouf gave a strictly European context to al-Wazzan's art of describing; the historical anthropologist Houari Touati saw his treatment of African animals as connected with earlier Arabic constructions; for Ahmed Boucharb, al-Wazzan's treatment of the battles between the Portuguese and the Moroccans was an extension of certain forms of Arabic historical writing, but his impartiality showed that he had dropped all feeling for the world of his origins; meanwhile Abdelmajid Kaddouri interpreted al-Wazzan's *Description* in terms of both Arabic and European genres.<sup>13</sup>



THE INTEREST IN cultural placement and movement of these Maghrebi colleagues is closest to my own concerns. I first came upon al-Hasan al-Wazzan's *Description of Africa* more than forty years ago, when I had just completed my doctoral dissertation on Protestantism and the printing workers of sixteenth-century Lyon. One of those Lyon Protestants was the merchant-publisher Jean Temporal, who was translating the *Description* into French and having it printed in the mid-1550s. I marveled at Temporal's breadth of interests and at the illustrations of an imagined Africa engraved by his brother-in-law.<sup>14</sup> But my attention then was on something else: on the confrontation of worker with employer and of layman with cleric within the dense life of a French city, subjects little attended to by the history-writing of the 1950s. The encounter between Europe and Africa embedded in the *Description* seemed far away and less urgent. The conversions I was trying to fathom were from Catholic to Protestant, perhaps especially interesting because they were taking place in the hearts and minds of *menu peuple*, little people. The sustained interplay between Islam and Christianity that I might have detected in the life and writing of "Jean Léon l'Africain" would have seemed too middling a religious stance to invite analysis.

In the mid-1990s the relation between European and non-European populations was at the center of things, and polar ways of thinking

were being challenged. Scholars like Homi Bhabha were configuring cultural relations between colonized and colonizer in India in terms of "hybridity" rather than clear "difference" and "otherness." Domination and resistance were still essential to understand the past, but the American historian Richard White could then go from there to map a "middle ground" in which diplomacy, trade, and other forms of exchange took place between Native Americans and the English who settled in their ancestral lands. Paul Gilroy was charting his *Black Atlantic*, "mov[ing] discussion of black political culture beyond the binary opposition between national and diaspora perspectives . . . locat[ing] the black Atlantic world in a webbed network, between the local and the global." I, too, was rethinking that Atlantic as I wrote about European women "on the margins," in contact with Iroquoian and Algonquian women in Québec and with Carib and African women in Suriname.<sup>15</sup>

It seemed a fine moment to return to Jean Léon l'Africain, whom I began to think of as al-Hasan al-Wazzan, the name he had for most of his life. I now also had family connections with his part of the world, in Morocco and Tunisia. Through his example, I could explore how a man moved between different polities, made use of different cultural and social resources, and entangled or separated them so as to survive, discover, write, make relationships, and think about society and himself. I could try to see whether these processes were easy or a struggle, whether they brought delight or disappointment. Like some others I have written about, al-Hasan al-Wazzan is an extreme case—most North African Muslims were not captured by Christian pirates or, if they were, were not handed over to the pope—but an extreme case can often reveal patterns available for more everyday experience and writing.<sup>16</sup>

A more serious danger was brought sharply to my attention when I was lecturing in Lyon, by an immigrant to France of non-European origin. He would have had me talk about the harsh policies of governments toward strangers and the economic and sexual exploitation of immigrants, not about cultural exchanges and newcomers' strategies of accommodation, some of them surreptitious. I have taken his warning seriously—relations of domination and relations of exchange always

interact in some way—and my picture of al-Hasan al-Wazzan notes when he was under the thumb of a master or a captor or ruler of some sort.

The years in which al-Wazzan lived, the last decades of the fifteenth century and the opening decades of the sixteenth, were packed with political and religious change and conflict. In the eastern Muslim world, the Ottoman Turks were on the move, conquering not only their Shi'ite neighbors in Persia but also their fellow Sunni rulers in Syria and Egypt. In the Maghreb (as the Islamic west was called) and especially in Morocco, Sufi religious movements and allied tribal leaders were threatening to shift the authority on which political rule was based. In Christian Europe, the Habsburg rulers were on the rise, expanding their domination of the Holy Roman Empire through shrewd marriage to control of Spain. The French monarchs challenged them at every turn, if not in their growing overseas empire, then for power in Europe and especially in Italy. As a vigorous Catholicism was giving new force to dynastic rule in Spain, the Lutheran movement was sprouting in Germany and challenging papal government in the church. While Muslims and Christians fought among themselves, the two religious groups were also confronting each other, the Spanish and Portuguese chalking up victories in the Iberian peninsula itself and the western Mediterranean, the Ottomans in the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean. Yet, in a paradox found often in history, these decades were also full of exchange across the same borders—trade, travel, and the movement of ideas, books, and manuscripts—and of shifting alliances that turned enemies into temporary collaborators. Such were the worlds, as we shall see in more detail, in which the hero of this book played his part.

I have tried to locate al-Hasan al-Wazzan as fully as possible in the sixteenth-century society of North Africa, peopled by Berbers, Andalusians, Arabs, Jews, and Blacks, and with Europeans eating away at its borders; to spell out the diplomatic, scholarly, religious, literary, and sexual perspectives he would have brought with him to Italy; to show him reacting to that Christian European society—what he learned, what interested and troubled him, what he did, how he changed, and especially how he wrote while there. My portrait is of a man with a

double vision, sustaining two cultural worlds, sometimes imagining two audiences, and using techniques taken from the Arabic and Islamic repertoire while folding in European elements in his own fashion.

As I have pursued al-Hasan al-Wazzan, the silences in the contemporary record and the occasional contradictions or mysteries in his texts have haunted me. Reading the letters, say, of a patron for whom al-Wazzan prepared a manuscript, I would hold my breath for mention of his name, and close the folder disappointed not to find it. Noting contradictions or implausibilities in, say, his travel times or biographical reports, I fussed to see if I could resolve them, and failed as often as I succeeded. Noting his own silence in regard to subjects that I thought would have been close to his heart, I clucked my tongue in disapproval. Finally, I realized that silences and occasional contradictions and mysteries were characteristic of al-Wazzan, and that I should accept them as clues to understanding him and his position. What kind of a person invites silence in his own societies and times? What kind of an author leaves a text with mysteries, contradictions, and inventions?

My strategy is to start with the persons, places, and texts that good evidence affirms or suggests he knew, and build from additional sources about them what he would have been likely to see or hear or read or do. Throughout I have had to make use of the conditional—"would have," "may have," "was likely to have"—and the speculative "perhaps," "maybe." These are my invitations to the reader to follow a plausible life story from materials of the time. Al-Wazzan's writings carry the main body of my tale, not just their content, but their author's strategies and mentality as they can be deduced from his manuscripts and their language. Changes in the later printed texts of his Africa book suggest what kind of man the Europeans preferred him to be.

Having traveled with al-Hasan al-Wazzan this far, I have tried to figure out how his story ended when he recrossed the Mediterranean to North Africa. What was the upshot of his life and his legacy? Did the Mediterranean waters not only divide north from south, believer from infidel, but also link them through similar strategies of dissimulation, performance, translation, and the quest for peaceful enlightenment?