Trickster Travels

A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds

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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.[1]

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.[2]

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."[3]

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.[4]

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."[5]

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.[6]

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.[7]

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.[8]

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.'"[9]

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.[10]

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.[11]

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."[12]

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.[13]

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.[14] 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.[15]

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.[16]

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.

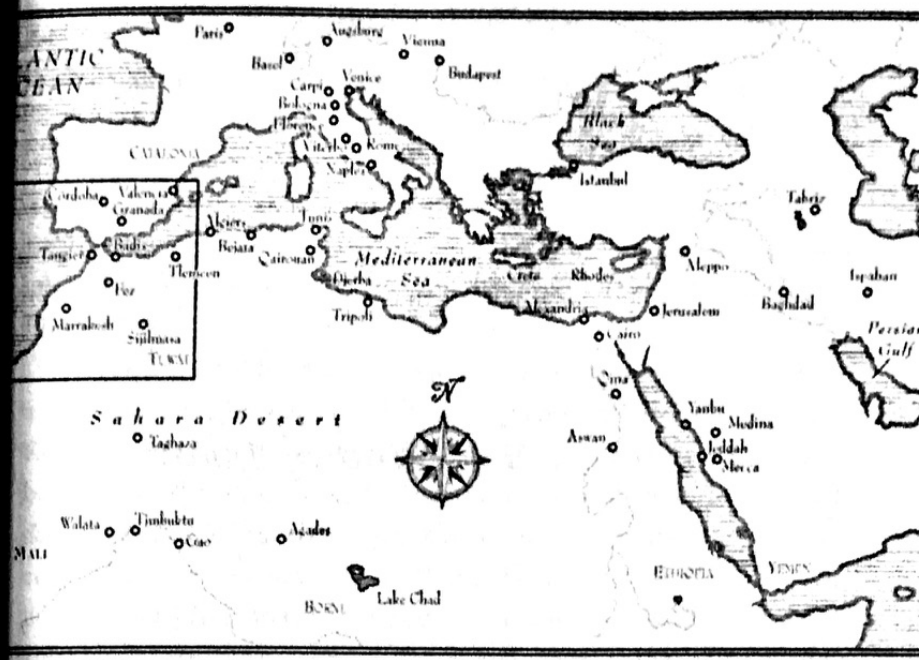
I have tried to locate al-Hasan al-Wazzan as fully as possible in the sixteenth-century society of North Africa, peopled by Berbers, Andalusians, Arabs, Jews, and Blacks, and with Europeans eating away at its borders; to spell out the diplomatic, scholarly, religious, literary, and sexual perspectives 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?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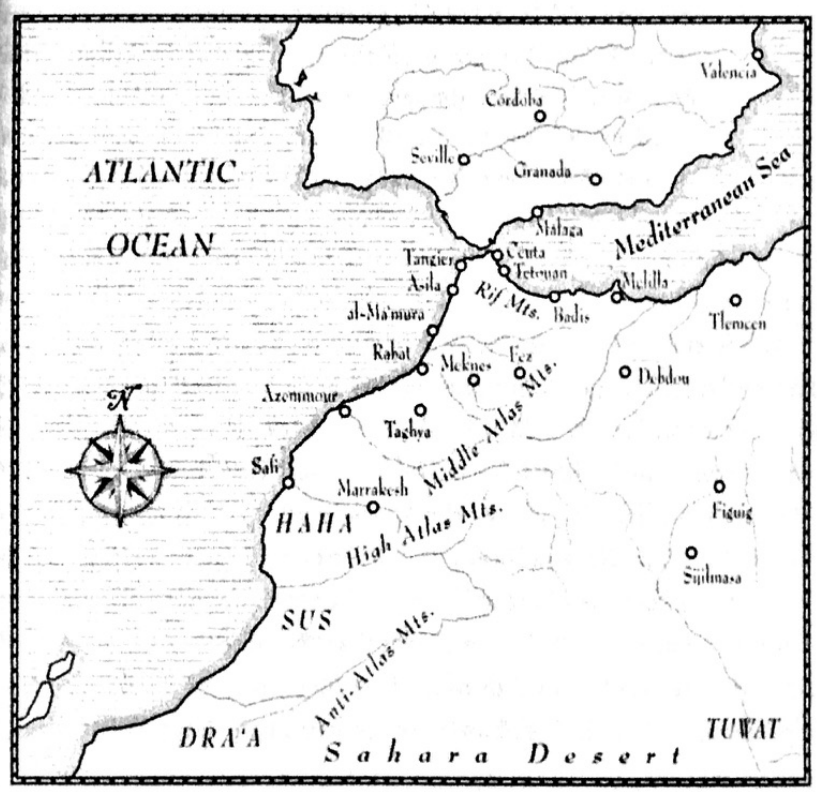
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SUS
Anti-Atlas Mts.
DRA'A
TUWAT
Sahara Desert

CHAPTER THREE

Writing in Italy

TWO YEARS AFTER promising Jacob Mantino a copy of his treatise on Arabic grammar and prosody, Yuhanna al-Asad could describe himself as the author of four other works as well. He was just finishing a big book on the geography and cosmography of Africa, and in its pages he found frequent excuse to refer his readers to his other compositions. There was his history book *The Epitome of Muslim Chronicles*. There was *The Faith and Law of Muhammad according to the Malikite School of Law*. And there was his book of collective biographies, *The Lives of Arab Scholars*.[1]

Each of these writings is an expression of Yuhanna al-Asad's life on both sides of the Mediterranean. On the one hand, they were each representative of a well-established genre in Arabic literature, including the abridgment (*mukhtasar*) of earlier history books,[2] and al-Hasan al-Wazzan may have had notes on some of their subjects in his bags when the pirates picked him up. He was a poet and a critical listener to poetry wherever he went; why would he not have jotted down comments on poetic meter along the way? He was twice solicited to be a qadi on

travels; why would he not have carried with him some reminders of Malikite jurisprudence?

On the other hand, these books were to serve readers in Europe as introductions to the world of Islam. Consider the treatise on Arabic metrics, which has come down to us copied "from the original" in 1527 by a scribe with a standard Italian humanist hand.[3] It is in Latin, though a Latin with some mistakes, which show that its author had still not fully mastered that tongue. (Scribes copied texts closely, mistakes and all.) The book opens with the "god-fearing and devout" al-Khalil al-Farahidi, the inventor of the art of Arabic metrics as well as of Arabic lexicography. Yuhanna al-Asad tells the familiar Arabic tale about al-Khalil that one day his brother came upon him in their house reciting nonsense syllables; he rushed into the streets to announce that al-Khalil had gone mad. In fact, these were the rhythmic words by which al-Khalil defined his metric patterns, and Yuhanna al-Asad goes on to use them throughout his text.[4]

Yuhanna al-Asad translates a few of al-Khalil's verses into Latin for his readers. "I am content with the small stock of my patrimony," the scholar had written in refusing to leave his native Basra to serve an important ruler in Arabia. "If you pursue fortune, you will not get near it; if you turn your back to it, fortune will pursue you."[5] Yuhanna al-Asad may have thought of his own very different choices as he recollected al-Khalil's words.

Yuhanna al-Asad then defines the nine kinds of Arabic metric feet, comparing them when relevant to Latin spondees and dactyls and pointing to contrasts in vocalizing syllables. Clearly he has made strides in his knowledge of European forms. Next come the seven metric patterns that different types of poems may have, starting off with one of his favorites, the long meter of *al-tawil*. He gives Arabic metric examples in transcribed Latin characters and includes a verse from a certain Kaʿb ibn Zuhayr: he is "our Arab poet," Yuhanna al-Asad explains, keeping to himself that Kaʿb was a pre-Islamic poet, who after writing against the Prophet signaled his surrender by a celebrated poem from

which a cited line—"only as the sieve holds on to the water"—is ta
(figure 7). The scribe left space in the manuscript for an occasio
word in Arabic to be inserted, but in this copy Yuhanna al-Asad fi
in only two.[6]

The manuscript could certainly get a European reader started on
principles of Arabic prosody, a subject on which only scanty inform
tion had been available to medieval scholars. But it is more compres
than what its author would have written for Arab readers alone,
whom he might have discussed alternative approaches to prosody fr
that of al-Khalil, some of them quite important. And he might ha
given many more examples and expanded his subject of metrics in
connections with metaphor and genre, as in the ninth-century Arab
treatise on poetry by Thaʿlab that he had borrowed from the Vatic
Library sometime after his baptism.[7]

CONSIDER ALSO his biographies of illustrious scholars. Here, too, w
have a Latin manuscript, also copied by a scribe "from the original" i
1527, with the title *De Viris quibusdam Illustribus apud Arabes* (O
Some Illustrious Men among the Arabs) and an additional section, *D*
quibusdam Viris Illustribus apud Hebraeos (On Some Illustrious Me
among the Jews). According to the title, the author is making a transla-
tion from his own Arabic text—"*ex ea lingua maternam traductis*"—
which belongs to the genre of the *tabaqat*, biographical compendiums
beloved by Arabic and Islamic scholars for centuries. These collections
grouped people by some criterion—say, occupation or place of origin—
and assessed their reliability and trustworthiness as transmitters of
knowledge from the past and as contributors to it. As such, each entry
should best include the subject's full name, with all it conveyed about an-
cestors and geographical origins; the names of the persons he had stud-
ied with or been trained by; and information about travel, contacts, and
publications, as well as the sources for the biographer's claims. (Some
compendia also included women noted for their holiness or learning.)[8]

Yuhanna al-Asad's *Illustrious Men* has several of the qualities of the

qat (figure 8). The collection is small compared to the dictionaries
undreds and even thousands of people composed in Dar al-Islam:
only twenty-eight men are depicted among the Arabs, including
e Nestorian or Jacobite Christians, and five men among the Jews.[9]
the lives, arranged chronologically, cover some of the customary
und: geographical and family origins, occupations, publications,
sonal anecdotes, and quotations; and they often include the names
views of previous biographers. Most of the men are physicians and
losophers, some branching into theology, astronomy, geography, or
, and many of them write poetry, as was expected among persons
tivated in the Arabic tongue. Thus from the philosopher al-Farabi,
hanna al-Asad recalls two lines of verse, which appear in the manu-
ipt in his own Arabic hand and in Latin translation:

> Base bread, well water, and woollen garment in peace
> Are better than excessive delight ending in penitence.[10]

About the Jacobite Christian Masawayh al-Maridini, practicing
edicine in eleventh-century Cairo and author of books on remedies
nd syrups, he tells the story of a farmer who came complaining to him
bout his sore penis. The farmer confessed that he had been giving his
male member extra use penetrating the anus of his donkey. Al-Maridini
pounded the man's penis roughly, got him to ejaculate some strange
fluid, and sent him back to his farm hurting less and with the warning,
"Don't direct your member into the aperture of your ass."[11]

The inclusion of such an immodest tale in a biographical com-
pendium was not exceptional. The celebrated thirteenth-century biog-
rapher Ibn Khallikan recorded the joking exchange in verse between a
Baghdad physician and learned translator and his vizier the night the
former had to take a laxative.[12]

At the same time, *De Viris Illustribus* shows the marks of Yuhanna
al-Asad's Italian years and his anticipated European audience. The
teachers or students of his Arab luminaries are mentioned in only a
few cases, and a full list is given only for Ibn Rushd (Averroës). Now,

to Muslims this information was believed essential to authenticate a person's reliablity in transmitting a theological, legal, or philosophical tradition. In North Africa, the writer would have done his best to acquire or recall a scholar's *isnad*, that is, to place him wherever possible in the chain of transmission. In Europe, he scarcely bothered to make up such a chain: for European readers he could simply announce that a scholar was a "*maximus Philosophus*," or "*singularissimus*" in medicine and philosophy and theology, or "*doctus*—learned in all sciences."[13]

Second, amid much valuable and enduring detail about Yuhanna al-Asad's subjects are mistakes in dates (always given in the Muslim form), places, events, and titles, or we should better say, these are departures from what he would have known from texts and traditions in North Africa. In part, his lapses are an understandable failure of memory in a situation where he lacked the manuscripts to help him: the Arabic biographical dictionaries he would have consulted at a madrasa library could not be found in the Vatican Library or the collections of Alberto Pio or Egidio da Viterbo.[14]

But in part, these departures are the fruits of unacknowledged invention, a practice resorted to more than once by our man between worlds. Take, for example, what he writes about the great physician and philosopher Abu Bakr al-Razi. Some of al-Razi's medical and alchemical manuscripts were already available in Europe in Latin translation, but very little was known there about his life. Yuhanna al-Asad starts off with al-Razi's birth in Persia in the ninth century and his training and practice in Baghdad, as was depicted in the standard earlier biographies by Ibn Khallikan and others. From Baghdad, Yuhanna al-Asad has al-Razi going to Cairo, where suddenly his fame wins him an invitation from one al-Mansur, the chamberlain and effective ruler of the Umayyad caliphate of Córdoba, and al-Razi moves west to a position of prominence and reward in this center of Muslim al-Andalus. There he writes his wide-ranging medical treatise *Kitab al-Mansuri* (The Book of al-Mansur) and spends the rest of his life. Citing the eleventh-century chronicler Ibn Hayyan, Yuhanna al-Asad reports a fascinating conversation between al-Mansur and al-Razi, where the former believes the

physician has resurrected a man from the dead, and al-Razi explains that only God can do that, his cures come from his medical practice.[15]

A scholar in the Islamic world would have been surprised to read this account, as existing biographies of al-Razi never got him much farther west than Baghdad, had him dedicating his famous book to the *Persian* Mansur al-Samani, and had him dying in his native town of Ray. Furthermore, the real al-Mansur of Córdoba held sway some fifty years after the physician al-Razi was in his grave; and there was a western al-Razi," but he was a local historian, one 'Isa al-Razi, whose job was to celebrate the Cordovan ruler by his writing and who was referred to by Ibn Hayyan in this connection. To be sure, Ibn Khallikan had raised the question about which Mansur was the dedicatee of *The Book of al-Mansur*, but he had two Persian potentates in mind. (Al-Mansur, which means "rendered victorious [by God]," was a name adopted by quite a few rulers.) Ibn Khallikan concluded with a standard Islamic formula when the evidence is uncertain: "God knows best which of these statements is true."[16]

Yuhanna al-Asad never uses such a phrase in his biographies, which come to his European readers without controversies about their truth. Here, where his memory is full of holes or his information skimpy, he simply puts together two men into an interesting life story and attributes it to a real historian. At a time when Jacob Mantino would have told him of the numerous editions of the *Liber Almansoris* recently published in Venice, Bologna, and Pavia, Yuhanna al-Asad could have some of al-Razi's medical glory rub off on the Muslim al-Andalus of his ancestors.[17]

Yuhanna al-Asad created vivid portraits of learned men, sometimes well substantiated by memory and whatever notes he had brought with him to Italy, sometimes improvised, approximate, or simply made up. Even with their mixture of what he believed as fact and what he knew was fabulation, they opened a world of scholarship for Europeans, adding to their meager knowledge of, say, the philosopher-theologian al-Ghazali and introducing them to unknown figures. They could learn of al-Tughra'i, described in the *Illustrious Men* as an alchemist, poet,

and historian of Persia (d. ca. 515/1121). They could learn of the remarkable Lisan al-Din ibn al-Khatib (d. 776/1374), described as historian, poet, physician, philosopher, and high political officer in the kingdom of Granada. Ibn al-Khatib's letters, couched in rhymed prose, were celebrated for their style and were found in many legal libraries in Fez and elsewhere.[18]

Further, since *Illustrious Men* was presenting European readers with an Islamic and Arabic genre unfamiliar to them, the tabaqat, and with some if not all of its literary conventions, they could see how Muslim scholars used citation and learn the names of the biographers: "Ibn Juljul, chronicler, said in the Lives of Philosophers that many princes of Asia sent for [al-Farabi], inviting him to come to their courts, promising money and stipends"; "Ibn al-Abbar . . . historian of Spain . . . said that Averroës was asked how he felt during the period of his persecution. He answered that he felt both pleased and despised." Some of the citations are spurious, to be sure. A story attributed to Ibn Khallikan, about how Avicenna (Ibn Sina) justified harnessing his mule with silver rather than iron, is not to be found in Ibn Khallikan's pages.[19] But the forms of the tabaqat are respected, and European readers could discover how Muslim scholars recorded conversation and wit. And as with the Arabic-Hebrew-Latin dictionary, the lives were described without religious polemic, and with Muslims of different theological schools, Christians, and Jews coexisting within the same learned frame. A copy of the manuscript seems to have been in Egidio da Viterbo's hands, and one wonders what the cardinal thought.[20]

WHATEVER JOY or frustration came to Yuhanna al-Asad in composing these minor works pales in comparison with what he must have felt as he wrote the great book of his Italian years: *Libro de la Cosmographia et Geographia de Affrica*. He finished its last lines on March 10, 1526. We know the book best and most accurately from the sole surviving copy: a 936-page manuscript in an early sixteenth-century Italian hand, now at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Rome.[21] It is written

a clear and often lively Italian but with a simplified syntax and a word e sometimes lacking in precision and nuance; its style is different from e turns of phrase, extended vocabulary, and alliterative prose that the ator-poet would have used in Arabic.

Its spelling yields clues as well. There was much diversity in orthography in early sixteenth-century Italy, but the spelling choices in this anuscript, while within the range of practice, are less those of a regional speaker than those of a speaker accustomed to the vowel sounds f Arabic and for whom the boundaries between Italian, Spanish, and atin were not always sharp. Such was Yuhanna al-Asad. For instance, e prefers *"el Re"* to *il Re*, *"el patre"* to *il padre*, *"el populo"* to *il opolo*, *"el templo"* to *il tempio*, *"el thesaurero"* to *il thesoriere*, and *la abundantia"* to *l'abbondanza*. In oasis towns, he always mentions *dattoli"* for dates, a word used for that fruit in Venice, but also closer o the Spanish *dátiles* or the Latin *dactyli* than to the common Italian *datteri*. Latin-like phrases—*"dicto"* and *"prefato"* (for "aforesaid")—rop up now and again.[22] All of this was to be changed, along with many other modifications, by the Venetian Giovanni Battista Ramusio, when he first published the book as *La Descrittione dell'Africa* in Venice n 1550: the syntax became more complex, the vocabulary more varied, he style more flowery and elevated, and the spelling more in line with hat urged by reformers.

How did Yuhanna al-Asad prepare his manuscript? In its closing phrase, just before the colophon, he uses language that recalls the ancient tradition of oral delivery: "the author cannot recall more because of the frailty of his memory . . . so he falls silent and ends his speaking." The reference to "speaking" here is figurative, a significant literary convention like Yuhanna al-Asad's use of the verb *dicere*, "to say," every time he cites an author in his *Illustrious Men*: it evokes direct transmission even though the message is carried by a valued written book.[23]

For centuries in Islamic societies the practice of oral delivery to copyists had been supplemented by the practice of writing one's own manuscript and then making copies oneself or having them made by scribes or students or others in one's circle. Sometimes oral delivery

humanist interests, geography and maps were his passion, and when in his last years he turned to publishing the travel accounts he had collected, the Africa manuscript of Giovanni Leone came first.[33] Having failed to unmask the exotic Jew from Arabia, Ramusio was certainly not going to let this prize African appear unpersuasive for his European readers. He edited and revised the text accordingly.

The *Libro de la Cosmographia et Geographia de Affrica* is thus a precious guide. Occasionally, changes made by Ramusio or translators of the book as he printed it will show us the pressures under which Yuhanna al-Asad lived in Italy and the ways in which his European interpreters wanted to reshape him.

THE *Cosmography and Geography of Africa* is disposed in nine "parts": a general introduction on geography, weather, customs, economy, and culture; seven parts each devoted to a description of towns, villages, mountains, and deserts of a region of Africa and the people dwelling there; and a conclusion on rivers, minerals, plants, birds, and animals. Interestingly, it mixes several genres valued for centuries in the cultures of Islam.

Geography had long been a central strand, pursued with different goals and approaches.[34] The influential al-Mas'udi (d. 346/957), a historian and geographer of encyclopedic interests, had gone well beyond Dar al-Islam in his description and brought into his ken many features of the earth's surface, its peoples, and their past. Along with a critical use of information and traditional stories, he insisted on travel as essential for the geographer and reproached scholars who had never seen the places they wrote about. As for him, he had journeyed from his native Baghdad as far as India, al-Andalus, and Zanzibar. "One can apply to me," he wrote, "the poet's verse: 'He has traveled the world in every direction . . . to countries so remote that no caravan has ever entered.'"[35]

A few decades later al-Muqaddasi had traveled almost as widely from his native Jerusalem, trading, consulting libraries, and meeting everyone from scholars and Sufis to storytellers: "I researched the

...xes . . . I tasted the air, I evaluated the water." His *Best Divisions for ...nowledge of the Regions* had a narrower range in space and time than ...l-Mas'udi's work: it was limited to the peoples, languages, and places ...f Islam, from al-Andalus to the lower Indus Valley, and it concentrated ...n the state of affairs in al-Muqaddasi's own time period. But his ob...ervations were richly detailed and fresh, and his organization as clear ...s his title promised.[36]

Al-Muqaddasi did not have much good to say about the Fez of his ...day ("crude and ignorant people, scholars are few, disturbances fre...quent"[37]), but the next two centuries were to see important geographers ...native to western Islam itself. Al-Bakri (d. 487/1094), a poet and diplo...mat for the amir of Seville, wrote a broad description of all kingdoms ...known to his Muslim contemporaries. His substantial section on North ...Africa covers some of the same ground as Yuhanna al-Asad's *Cosmog...raphy and Geography*, but does so following the old tradition of con...sulting, evaluating, and citing books and documents. Al-Bakri never left ...al-Andalus, yet his transition from section to section of his book is not ...based on some system of regions, but on routes—on how many days, ...for instance, it took to get from Fez to Sijilmasa.[38]

In the middle of the twelfth century, the renowned al-Idrisi entitled his geography *The Recreation of Him Who Yearns to Travel across the World*. Some scholars say he voyaged from his native al-Andalus as far ...west as Asia Minor and as far east and north as England; others, that he ...may have traveled little more than in the western Mediterranean to ...the then Norman Christian kingdom of Sicily and in North Africa, ...where his medical training gave him a good eye for plants and their ...pharmaceutical uses. The rest of his ample information came from ...geographical texts and royal archives.

Al-Idrisi dedicated his book to Roger II, son of the Norman con...queror of Muslim Sicily, patron of Arabic culture, and in al-Idrisi's ...eyes, a philosopher king. His geography had something to say about all ...parts of the world known to the writer, sometimes with considerable ...detail about towns and their monuments. Days required for travel and ...routes were regularly given, but the geography was organized according

to the traditional seven climatic zones that united all regions from east to west. These *aqalim*, called *klimata* in Greek, were latitudinal zones that Ptolemy had defined according to the height of the noonday sun at the solstice. One school of Arabic geographers in the east pursued this astronomical approach, reevaluating Ptolemy's figures and assigning improved latitudinal and longitudinal values to places on the earth's surface.[39] This was not al-Idrisi's way: he explained in his prologue that although the climatic zones were drawn from astronomical observation, he identified them by natural features and settlements—"the first climate begins at the west, with the western sea called Shadowy Ocean [the Atlantic]." He added to his written text a world map (figure 11) and many sectional maps by which these spatial relations and the climates could be visualized.[40]

Maps were an important tool for many Arabic geographers, whether or not they coupled them with astronomical calculation. Al-Muqaddasi had developed a color code for the regional maps in his *Best Divisions*: red for routes, yellow for sand, green for the sea, blue for rivers, and brown for mountains. Later maps for al-Idrisi's geography followed this or a similar prescription.[41]

Yuhanna al-Asad cited three of these authors—al-Masʿudi, al-Bakri, and al-Idrisi. (He devoted an appreciative entry to the last in his *Illustrious Men among the Arabs*.)[42] He probably knew al-Muqaddasi's great book as well. In his own book, he could place himself in the line of those who saw travel as essential to geographical description, along with oral inquiry and the consultation of texts. His geography was confined to one spatial unit, albeit a very large one, rather than covering all the countries of Islam or the known world, but perhaps with these other geographers in mind, he said he hoped one day to write about Asia and Europe as well.

Though Yuhanna al-Asad called his book both a *cosmography* and a *geography*—words found in titles of recent Latin editions of Ptolemy[43]—he did not use Ptolemy's latitudes and longitudes to give locations or even refer to astronomical means of determining place. (Indeed, *Geography* can serve me henceforth as a better short title for his book.) Nor

did he locate places by days of travel between them, as had al-Bakri and al-Idrisi. Rather, he based his estimates of distance between places in miles (*mil*, *amyal* in Arabic): "Aït Daoud is an ancient settlement built by the Africans on a high mountain . . . It has about 700 households and is almost fifteen miles south of Tagtessa," he writes of a town in the Haha region of Morocco; "Asyut is a very ancient city built by the Egyptians on the Nile about 250 miles from Cairo."[44]

No maps accompanied Yuhanna al-Asad's manuscript. These he might have included if he had been preparing his book in North Africa—not a world map like the one in Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima*, nor a map of Mediterranean harbors, shoals, and inlets like the ones being drawn by Admiral Piri Reis in 931/1525 to accompany his *Book of Navigation* for Sultan Suleyman (figure 13), but sectional maps, helpful for travelers and rulers that showed the relation between places like those in al-Muqaddasi's *Best Divisions*.[45] In Italy, he must have wondered how readers would use such maps: European traders stayed close to their city compounds in North Africa; European captives were in chains or otherwise limited. As for European soldiers, why facilitate their movements in Dar al-Islam?

Further, having maps made in Italy, in the European style unfamiliar to him, would have been difficult. Even an accomplished geographer, the German Jacob Ziegler, who was in Rome in the early 1520s, had an artist traveling with him to draft his maps. Yuhanna al-Asad would have had to find a cartographer like the Venetian Giacomo Gastaldi, who forty years later drew a remarkable map of Africa that appeared in Ramusio's *Voyages* (figure 14). But how was Yuhanna al-Asad to get to such a person, and who would pay him? For all their breadth of learning, neither Alberto Pio nor Egidio da Viterbo had maps as a central interest. The historian Paolo Giovio drafted maps himself and knew others who did, but he was a busy man and not a patron of our convert. Clement VII asked Giovio to get information about Russia, including geographical information, but he seems not to have turned to Giovanni Leone for visual images of Africa.[46] Yuhanna al-Asad thus settled for verbal descriptions in a foreign tongue.

Travel figures in the *Geography* not only as a form of proof but as a form of life for its author. Since the ninth century travel had become a path to discovery for the Muslim scholar—discovery not of something considered foreign and exotic but of the character and meaning of Islam itself. Travel was also a test, hardships being welcomed as an ascetic challenge: the mountain and the desert were places where encounters with the sacred might be expected. Eventually, scholars began to write about their travels; a full recital of them was called a rihla.[47] A highly appreciated one was by the Andalusian Ibn Jubayr (d. 614/1217), whose pilgrimage to Mecca took him from Granada to Egypt, Syria, and Iraq with a return across the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem and the Norman kingdom of Sicily. Even while describing the latter two in arresting detail, he exclaimed,

> There can be no excuse in the eyes of God for a Muslim to stay in any infidel country, save when passing through it, while the way lies clear in Muslim lands . . . The heart will be distressed by the reviling of him [Muhammad] whose memory God has sanctified . . . There is also the absence of cleanliness, the mixing with the pigs, and all the other prohibited matters.[48]

We have already heard something of the rihla of Ibn Battuta, who went from his native Tangier as far east as China and as far south as Mogadishu. He sought Muslim worthies wherever he could, and though he did not hasten away from infidel lands, he did say of one of them:

> China was beautiful, but it did not please me. On the contrary, I was greatly troubled thinking about the way paganism dominated this country. Whenever I went out of my lodging, I saw many blameworthy things. That disturbed me so much that I stayed indoors most of the time and only went out when necessary. During my stay in China, whenever I saw any Muslims I always felt as though I were meeting my own family and close kinsmen.[49]

Yuhanna al-Asad's adventures as recounted in his *Geography* are not consecutive, as in a rihla. They weave in and out of his narrative; sometimes the reader is following his actual path, sometimes not. But the spirit of Islamic voyage and the literary potential of the rihla helped him interpret and write about his own travels, so strangely interrupted and redirected to an infidel land.

Yuhanna al-Asad's Africa book also included history, as did the geographies of al-Masʿudi and al-Bakri. His description of Marrakesh, for instance, calls forth a review of its Almoravid and Almohad rulers of centuries before; the description of Tunis opens with a précis of its history since the fall of Carthage. Local and recent history in Moroccan lands he often gleaned from interviews during his travels, as we have seen. Among his written sources, the most influential was the great *Kitab al-ʿIbar* (The Book of Examples) of Ibn Khaldun, that universal history ranging from a broad science of civilization to a circumstantial account of the Berbers and the Arabs to autobiography; its many volumes had been available at the mosque of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, a signed gift from the author. (The *Kitab al-ʿIbar* was surely one of the history books summarized in Yuhanna al-Asad's lost *Epitome of Muslim Chronicles*.) The *Geography* echoes Ibn Khaldun's social vision in certain ways, especially in its appreciation of urban patterns of living.[50]

Beyond this mixture of geography, travel account, and history, other topics weave in and out of Yuhanna al-Asad's text. There are autobiographical nuggets spread throughout. There are asides on Sufism, on the Four Schools of Law among the Sunnis, and on the various Muslim sects. A stop at an inhospitable town in the kingdom of Tunisia triggers the quotation of a vituperative verse about the place by al-Dabbag, a "marvelous" poet from Málaga, who, like him, had been rebuffed there. Yuhanna al-Asad goes on to explain some of the conventions of such poetry of invective (*hijaʾ*), comparing al-Dabbag's verses with the laudatory verses of the Granadan Ibn al-Khatib on the same towns. He regrets that his Italian translation cannot convey the "elegance" of the verse in Arabic.[51]

have already heard a few from the *Lives of Illustrious Men*. Here Yuhanna al-Asad was drawing upon the long-established criteria of *adab*: rules both for decorous, seemly, and humane conduct—appropriate at court; and for cultivated, witty, and knowledgeable expression—appropriate for "profane literature." Except for his book about Muslim faith and Malikite law, most of Yuhanna al-Asad's compositions fell into this broad category. Writing in his still somewhat simple Italian, he could not hope for elegant style, but at least he could incorporate one element essential to adab literature, the entertaining and instructive anecdote. Whatever else, one must not be boring. Cultivated Italians, reading or soon to be reading Baldassare Castiglione's *Courtier*, would nod assent.[52]

Yuhanna al-Asad said several times that he was "telling the truth" in his book. He was recounting what he had observed with his own eyes, so he assured his readers often, or had heard about from some local person. As he puts it in regard to towns along the Nile, for example, "the writer says he has seen these towns, in some cases entering them and in others passing next to them, but he always informed himself fully by talking to their inhabitants and to the boatmen who took him from Cairo to Aswan." He goes on to express his doubts about al-Masʿudi's claims concerning the mountains around the headwaters of the Nile: though it was credible that emeralds were found there, al-Masʿudi's report of wild folk running like goats was probably one of his "lies."[53]

In making these comments, Yuhanna al-Asad was associating his book with the truth status claimed for historical writing, geography, and travel accounts. Ibn Khaldun opened his *Prolegomena* acknowledging the unavoidability of some "untruth" in historical information, gave many examples of erroneous and baseless stories that had bounced down the centuries (including some "absurdities" found in al-Masʿudi), and then recommended methods of social and political analysis by which historians could "find the path of truth and correctness." Ibn Battuta explained that however much the recital of travel delighted the

mind and ears with anecdote, it was supposed to give true and useful knowledge at the same time.[54]

Along with his claims to speak true, Yuhanna al-Asad's imagination was touched by the fictional tales entitled *Maqamat* (Assemblies). The most celebrated were by the Persian al-Hamadhani (d. 398-399/1008), creator of the genre, and the Iraqi al-Hariri (d. 516/1122). Their *Maqamat* were copied many times over and had their imitators in al-Andalus. In these stories, expressed in rhymed prose (sadjʿ) interspersed with metered verse, a learned and literary voyager tells his fellow scholars and merchants about his adventures and especially about an amazing man who appears in different disguises in the far-flung cities of Dar al-Islam. This man begs, he argues, he preaches, he pleads, always breaking into poetry, which the narrator quotes, and he always ends up on his feet and usually with fresh gifts and alms, bestowed upon him by his trusting listeners. Whatever his imposture, he is finally recognized by the storyteller as the same man: the shaykh Abu-l-Fath from Alexandria in al-Hamadhani's *Maqamat*, Abu Zayd from Saruj in al-Hariri's. As he told his own story, Yuhanna al-Asad put himself in the position of the traveling narrator and the trickster vagabond both.[55]

OF ALL OUR VOYAGER'S WRITINGS, a book on Africa is the one al-Wazzan would have been most likely to compose even if he had never left the world of Islam. He was keeping notes throughout his travels and consulting manuscripts whenever he could; he may have had an initial plan for a book and partial drafts of some sections in Arabic on his person when he was kidnapped.[56] However that may be, it was in Italy that he became an author, and the final version of the *Libro de la Cosmographia et Geographia de Affrica* bears the stamp of his stay there, quite apart from the choice of language. With so few Arabic manuscripts available in Rome and Bologna, he was cut off from sources in which to verify his citations and his facts of history and geography. Whereas in his book of biographies, he concealed his vulnerability, in the *Geogra-*

phy he confesses to it—"I haven't seen a history book for ten years"—and explains that he must rely on his "weak memory" for, say, a picture of the origins and genealogy of "Berberized Arabs," rather than being able to look it up "in the History of the Arabs by Ibn Khaldun."[57]

And indeed, his memory sometimes failed him: some facts are wrong, some citations lead nowhere. Scholars in North Africa made similar mistakes, of course; even Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima*, the book of introduction that opens his great history, has some unreliable references.[58] Apart from slips in memory, a scholarly system depending so heavily for authority on citation invited some play with the practices of transmission. The temptation may have been all the stronger for a faqih far from home writing in Italian.

In a sense, though, Yuhanna al-Asad wrote his book with two audiences in mind. His primary audience was in Italy. For his Italian readers, he searched for equivalents in weights, measures, coinages, foods, and material objects. For them, he sought Italian translations for words for which there was no perfect equivalent, such as *shaykh*, *qadi*, *Ramadan*, *khalifa*, *imam*, *qabila*, and *waqf*. For instance, *qabila*, or "tribe," came out "*populo*" (people) or "*sterpe*" (race); *khalifa*, or "caliph," came out "*Pontefece*," that is, pope. (Surely his work with Mantino on the dictionary helped him here.) For them, he struggled valiantly to transcribe Arabic words, names, and place-names. So Ibn Khaldun, as we transcribe it today, becomes Ibnu Calden and Ibnu Chaldun; al-Buni (d. 622/1225) and his encyclopedic book on secret knowledge of divine things, *Sams al-maʿarif*, become El Boni, *Semsul meharif*. For Italian readers, too, he included only those animals "not found in Europe or that were in some ways different from those in Europe."[59]

Yet Yuhanna al-Asad also had African or at least North African readers and listeners in part of his mind as he composed. He must have imagined at least a few of them as possible readers of this Italian manuscript, and many of them as potential readers of a much-revised Arabic version. Would not a new book that included information on Mamluk Egypt on the eve of the Ottoman occupation, or the Land of the Blacks under the Songhay emperor, be of interest to educated peo-

ple and rulers in the Maghreb? Much of the local detail and anecdote on religious conflict and political intrigue in the Maghreb may also have been included for their eventual benefit. (Occasionally Ramusio shortened it for the later printed edition, so as not to tire a European audience.)[60]

What were the dangers and difficulties of imagining a double audience? From the Muslim point of view, Yuhanna al-Asad was living in Dar al-Harb, the Land of War, the abode of infidels. Venice, which sustained diplomatic and commercial ties with the Ottoman empire, might be defined as Dar al-ʿAhd, the abode of treaty or covenant. Yuhanna al-Asad would have recalled the treaty that the Wattasid amir of Badis had made with the Venetians back in 913/1508 before the Spanish had seized that coastal town: the two sides affirmed a state of peace between them and promised they would not enslave each other's inhabitants or seize a compatriot for the crimes or debts of another.[61]

But Rome, Bologna, and Viterbo were certainly not in that peaceful category. Yuhanna al-Asad was living in Italy as a Christian convert, not himself at war with Italy but not wholly at peace either. Writing the *Geography*, he had to think carefully about what he should say and especially what he should *not* say, lest he offend those on whose favor he depended so long as he remained in Italy. Perhaps Yuhanna al-Asad thought back to the sharif al-Idrisi, composing his geography in Norman Sicily for the Christian king Roger, but had to admit how much easier his predecessor's situation was than his: al-Idrisi had been allowed to practice the Five Pillars of his faith and had been praised by King Roger as another Ptolemy (so Yuhanna al-Asad said in his biography).[62]

For possible North African or Muslim readers, too, Yuhanna al-Asad would have had to take precautions. At the end of part eight of the *Geography*, he announces that he wants very much to write a book about the parts of Asia and Europe he has visited, and that he has resolved that "once, with the grace of God, he had returned safe and sound from his voyage in Europe, he would arrange such a book . . . and put it together with the present work."[63] Yuhanna al-Asad had to write an Africa book that, if it fell into the hands of a Muslim dignitary who could read Italian or have it translated—say, the Ottoman ambassador

to Venice—would not be too offensive. He had to write a book about Africa that would allow him one day to go back and write another.

His "voyage in Europe," "*viagio de la Europa*"—his sole reference to a trip that began with his kidnapping and more than a year in prison—is an example of Yuhanna al-Asad's strategic caution. To please Christian readers, he would have had to express his thankfulness for his seizure by pirates, which opened the path leading to his baptism; to please possible Muslim readers, he would have had to condemn that violence. Better not to mention the pirate Bobadilla at all and savor the irony of sly reference to other pirates at other times. 'Isa ibn Hisham, the traveling narrator in al-Hamadhani's *Maqamat*, opens one of his stories of the trickster vagabond, "I was suspected on account of some property I had gotten and so I fled . . . until I came to a desert." That is all that 'Isa ibn Hisham reveals about the occasion for his flight.[4] Yuhanna al-Asad had even more reason for circumspection.

CHAPTER FOUR

Between Africa and Europe

THE *Cosmography and Geography of Africa* is a book of description and commentary, in which its author consciously moves back and forth between Europe and Africa, between the different cultures and polities of Africa, and between Islam and Christianity. Yuhanna al-Asad offers us a few clues to interpret his double vision.

The first is early in the book. After an overview of the peoples and customs of Africa, he concludes with an account of the "virtues" and "vices" of the Africans, those living along the Mediterranean coast, those living in the nomadic communities of the deserts, and those living in the Land of the Blacks. This pro-and-con weighing is found in other Arabic geographies, but Yuhanna al-Asad goes on with an unusual reflection: "The author admits to not a little shame and confusion in . . . disclosing the vices and disgraceful qualities of Africa, having been nourished and raised there, and known as a man of purity. But it is necessary for anyone who wants to write to tell things as they are."[1]

He, Yuhanna al-Asad, must be "similar in his act of composition" to the executioner found in a story in *The Book of the Hundred Tales (nel*