

# Leo Africanus: The Man with Many Names<sup>1</sup>

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The sixteenth-century Andalusí adventurer Leo Africanus was a household name amidst European geographers for almost three centuries. He was unanimously respected as the most authoritative source for the political and human geography of the Barbary Coast and Sudanic Africa, until the beginning of European exploration and expansion in the African continent proved his knowledge outdated. In the European historiography of Sudanic Africa, Leo's influence lasted for much longer. One important reason for his persistent popularity was that no rivalling sources were available, save the description of Africa written by his Christian countryman, Luis del Mármol Carvajal (c.1520–1600), who was unjustly labelled by the seventeenth-century scholars a mere copyist of Leo Africanus.<sup>2</sup> The Portuguese had successfully mapped the coasts of Africa already by the early sixteenth century, but they had not been able to penetrate the interior of the continent. Their advance was checked by local resistance and lethal endemic diseases. Moreover, sub-Saharan Africa was largely forgotten after Europeans had found their way to the wonders and treasures of the New World and India.

Very little is known about the actual life of Leo Africanus, in spite of his well-established posthumous fame. He did not leave many marks in contemporary documents. Most information of his life is based on the autobiographical notes in his own work and on the few remarks in other sixteenth-century European texts. Therefore, it has been suggested that

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the speech I held at the Finnish Institute in Rome (Villa Lante) on 7 November 2001. I am grateful to the director of the Institute, Dr Christian Krötzel, for his invitation which also offered me an opportunity to visit the Vatican Library. The speech itself was based on the section dealing with Leo Africanus in my book *The Negroland Revisited. Discovery and Invention of the Sudanese Middle Ages*, Helsinki 2000: Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, Humaniora 309 (see chapter 4, pp.167–75). This article is, however, no abridged version of that section. When finishing my book in the summer of 1999, I was completely unaware of Dietrich Rauchenberger's excellent study which has overnight made all previous biographical literature on Leo Africanus outdated (see footnote 5 below). This concerns my own book, too. I also adopted a too harsh attitude towards Professor Angela Codazzi who after all represented the highest authority on Leo's life and works before Rauchenberger. Yet the modern "Leo lore" contains so many fantastic elements that the critical reader should always take all undocumented information with a pinch of salt. The problem in Codazzi's publications is that she does not always indicate her sources adequately. This article should be read as a revised edition of the relevant section in my book. On the other hand, my outdated information of Leo's biography—e.g. where and when he was captured—hardly compromise my much wider conclusions concerning his influence on the development of European historiography of Sudanic Africa, which is the actual subject of my book, neither does it affect my commentary on his description of Sudanic Africa as an historical source. I am also grateful to Cristel de Rouvray for her many inspiring comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> On the relationship of Leo Africanus with Mármol, see Masonen, *The Negroland Revisited*, pp.217–21).

the man never existed and that his celebrated description of African geography was actually composed by a Venetian ghostwriter on the basis of contemporary Italian reports on Northern Africa.<sup>3</sup> This suggestion is plausible, for Italian merchants had been trading in North African ports since the twelfth century and they must have gained a reasonably good information of the area. Leo Africanus himself mentioned that he had met several Genoese merchants in Morocco. One of them, called Thomaso de Marino, had been living in Fez for thirty years.<sup>4</sup> However, the suggestion is too rigid, for a few examples of Leo's autographs have survived, but it still contains a grain of truth: Leo Africanus is somewhat a legendary character and much of our conventional knowledge of his life rests on speculations made by his enthusiastic admirers. The most comprehensive and scholarly biography of Leo Africanus has been written by Dietrich Rauchenberger who has drawn on hitherto neglected Italian archival material.<sup>5</sup> A modern historical novel about Leo Africanus was written by the Lebanese-French author Amin Maalouf.<sup>6</sup>

## The Early Years

Leo Africanus was born in Islamic Spain, in the city of Granada, or so he himself claimed.<sup>7</sup> According to his earliest surviving autograph, his original Arabic name was al-Hasan b. Muhammad al-Fasi.<sup>8</sup> His family background was not particularly important, though Leo was seemingly proud of his Granadan ancestry and delighted whenever he met other refugees from his hometown during his travels in Northern Africa. Once in Morocco, for example, Leo and his nine travelling companions were entertained by a rich man from Granada for three days.<sup>9</sup> The exact date of his birth is unclear, but it most likely took place some time after

<sup>3</sup> Louis Massignon, *Le Maroc dans les premières années du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Tableau géographique d'après Léon l'Africain*, Algiers 1906: Mémoires de la Société Historique Algérienne, I, p.23

<sup>4</sup> *Delle descrittione dell'Africa et delle cose notabili che iui sono, per Giovan Lioni Africano* [in: Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, volume I, Venice 1550], f.32, 'Sela citta'. Hereafter the text is referred to as *Descrittione*.

<sup>5</sup> *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner. Seine Beschreibung des Raumes zwischen Nil und Niger nach dem Urtext*, Wiesbaden 1999: Harrassowitz Verlag, Orientalia Biblica et Christiana 13. As the book is in German, there is a great danger that it will remain unnoticed in the Anglophone and Francophone circles. Therefore, it would be most desirable, if the book were translated in English as soon as possible.

<sup>6</sup> *Léon l'Africain*, Paris 1986; English translation, *Leo the African*, London & New York 1988; Spanish translation *León el Africano*, Madrid 1989. There are translations in many other European languages, too. See *Descrittione*, f.103: "Finisce il libro di Giovan Lion, nasciuto in Granata et allevato in Barberia."

<sup>8</sup> This autograph appears in an Arabic manuscript preserved in the Vatican Library and was written by Leo in December 1518 when he was kept in Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome (see footnote 36 below). According to an another autograph, written in April 1519, his name was al-Hasan b. Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Wazzan al-Fasi (see Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, pp.68–69; also Giorgio Levi Della Vida, *Ricerche sulla formazione del più antico fondo dei manoscritti orientali della Biblioteca Vaticana*, Città del Vaticano 1939: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, studi e testi, 92, pp.100–8).

<sup>9</sup> *Descrittione*, f.24, 'Elmadina citta di Hascora'.

Granada had surrendered to their Catholic Majesties on 1 January 1492. In modern literature Leo's birth is usually dated between the years 1489 and 1496. Leo himself offers some references to his age in his own work. He wrote, for instance, that he was about twelve years old when the Portuguese took the port of Safi on the Moroccan Atlantic coast.<sup>10</sup> From other sources we know that this event took place in August 1507. Elsewhere he wrote that he was some sixteen years old when he visited Timbuktu in the winter of 1509–10.<sup>11</sup> According to this information, Leo should have been born some time in 1494 AD.<sup>12</sup>

Leo did not stay for long in Granada. His family moved to Morocco, probably soon after their son was born.<sup>13</sup> It is customarily claimed that the family was driven to Africa by Spanish policy, which had quickly turned hostile to the remaining Muslim population in Granada, despite the initial promises to allow them religious freedom. This claim is actually based on a mistranslation of Leo's original Italian text; the man himself provides no reason why and when his family decided to leave Granada.<sup>14</sup> It is more probable that Leo's parents simply followed the example set by the noble families of the city. Boabdil, the last Muslim ruler of Granada, emigrated to Morocco already in 1493. The prevailing view among Islamic jurists was that the Muslims of a country conquered by the infidels should emigrate rather than remain under infidel rule. If the infidels were tolerant, this made the need to depart more urgent, since the danger of apostasy was correspondingly greater. The forced conversions did not start until 1499 when Francisco Ximénez de Cisneros, the spirited Archbishop of Toledo, was sent to Granada to speed things up. Those Muslims of Granada, who had refused to embrace Christianity, were finally deported to Northern Africa in 1502, after their unsuccessful revolt.

The family settled in Fez which was the most important city of the western Maghrib and capital of the Wattasid sultans who ruled the northern part of modern Morocco. In Fez, young al-Hasan b. Muhammad received a sound education at the Islamic university of al-Qarawiyyin, although the surviving records of al-Qarawiyyin do not show his name. While studying, he supplemented his meagre income by working for two years as a secretary in the bimaristan of Fez, a hospital for sick foreigners and poor combined with a lunatic asylum.

<sup>10</sup> *Descrittione*, f.22, 'Azafi citta'.

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 19 below.

<sup>12</sup> Rauchenberger suggests October–November 1494 (*Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p.36). See also Raymond Mauny, 'Note sur les "grands voyages" de Léon l'Africain', *Hespéris*, XLI, 1954, p.380.

<sup>13</sup> Rauchenberger suggests AH 902/1496–97 AD, though he offers no decisive evidence for this date (*Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p.37).

<sup>14</sup> See the Latin translation by Johannes Florianus (*De totius Africae descriptione*, Antwerp 1556, f. iij: "Neq est quòd quisquam Authoris nostri vigilias ceu somnia vel figmenta criminetur: hic fiquidem natione Granatensis, patria per Ferdinandum & Elisabeth Hispaniarum Reges expugnata in Barbariam profungiens, Fessae literis Arabicis operam dedit, quibus & libris à se editis clarus euasit").

Thereafter, he entered the service of the Wattasid Sultan Muhammad II al-Burtuqali (“the Portuguese”, 1504–26). He carried out several commercial and diplomatic missions on behalf of his sovereign, but his true motive for travelling seems to have been wanderlust and personal curiosity.

In 1507–8, al-Hasan b. Muhammad, who was then perhaps merely fourteen years old, is said to have performed the first of his great voyages, visiting Constantinople, Beirut, and Baghdad.<sup>15</sup> We do not know his reason for undertaking such a long journey to the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East—if he ever did.<sup>16</sup> The historicity of this adventure rests on Leo’s obscure remark in his work. When describing the city of Aswan in Upper Egypt, he mentions in passing that he had been to Constantinople in his “early adolescence” (*principio dè la sua Gioventu*).<sup>17</sup> It is not clear what he meant with this remark. Retrospectively, considering that Leo was writing in 1526, the remark might refer to his visit to the Ottoman capital in 1515, that is before his arrival in Egypt in 1517, when he was some twenty-one years old;<sup>18</sup> an age which one could still describe an “adolescence”.

The next adventure, which took place in the winter of 1509–10, rests on much firmer ground. According to his own words, al-Hasan b. Muhammad accompanied one of his uncles on a diplomatic mission to Timbuktu in the name of the Wattasid sultan of Fez.<sup>19</sup> Their purpose was to pay homage to Askiya Muhammad Ture (1493–1528), founder and ruler of the mighty Songhay Empire, whose power was even recognized in the western Saharan oases. Timbuktu was at that time the most important centre of trans-Saharan caravan trade with some 50.000 inhabitants.<sup>20</sup> Yet the capital of the Songhay Empire was Gao, which lies further to the east of the Niger bend, and Leo did not meet the Askiya but some of his lieutenants. The relationship between the rulers of Songhay and Morocco was troubled from the beginning. In the 1540s the Sadid ruler of Marrakesh demanded Askiya Ishaq I (1539–49) of Songhay to hand him some important oases in the western Sahara. Askiya Ishaq’s response to this outrageous demand was to launch an attack to the north, which advanced to the gates of Marrakesh, forcing the Sadid ruler to flee from his capital. Finally, in 1591 a Moroccan army,

<sup>15</sup> Mauny, ‘Note’, p.386.

<sup>16</sup> Rauchenberger suggests (*Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p.45) that Leo performed a pilgrimage to Mecca with Ahmad al-Araj and Muhammad al-Mahdi, the brothers who established the Sadid dynasty of Morocco (see footnote 26 below). This is mere speculation.

<sup>17</sup> *Descrittione*, f.96, ‘Asuan citta’; see Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p.45.

<sup>18</sup> *Descrittione*, f.33, ‘Machmora’.

<sup>19</sup> *Descrittione*, f.26, ‘Teneus monte’.

<sup>20</sup> Elias N. Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables 1400–1900*, Cambridge 1983, pp.27 and 90.

consisting of many Spanish renegades, crossed the Sahara and conquered Timbuktu with the help of firearms.<sup>21</sup>

Two years later, in 1512, al-Hasan b. Muhammad allegedly visited Timbuktu again, although this time in purely personal affairs. From Timbuktu he is claimed to have extended his voyage further to the other important places of Sudanic West Africa: the commercial centres of Walata and Jenne, and the capital city of Mali; thence to Egypt, through Hausaland, Bornu, and Agadez; eventually returning to Fez in 1514.<sup>22</sup> Even if we accepted al-Hasan b. Muhammad's second visit to Timbuktu as historical,<sup>23</sup> his wider excursions within the Sudanic Africa are mythical and based on the speculation by modern scholars who read his book like an itinerary.<sup>24</sup> As a matter of fact, it is doubtful whether the man ever crossed the Sahara at all. His description of the "Land of the Blacks" is the shortest of the nine books of his work and there is nothing, or at least very little, that suggests that the data should be based on his own observations. Instead, he could have collected all his information from Moroccan traders and West African pilgrims whom he was able to meet and interview during his travels in Northern Africa.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, after 1514, al-Hasan b. Muhammad devoted himself wholeheartedly to a vagabond life in Morocco. He was often accompanied by a man he called "Serif" (*sharif*), who was rebelling against the Wattasid sultan of Fez.<sup>26</sup> Throughout their period of power, the Wattasids encountered the hostility of the religious orders on account of their failure to resist the Portuguese conquests and to check the Jews' infiltration into governmental affairs.<sup>27</sup> It is tempting to identify this "Serif" with Ahmad al-Araj (c.1488–1557) who had become the de facto ruler of the province of Sus, in southern Morocco, in 1511 and gained much

<sup>21</sup> See Lansiné Kaba, 'Archers, Musketeers, and Mosquitoes: The Moroccan Invasion of the Sudan and the Songhay Resistance', *Journal of African History*, XXII, 1981, pp.457–75.

<sup>22</sup> Mauny, 'Note', p.383.

<sup>23</sup> Leo recorded that at Kabara, the riverine port of Timbuktu, he had met a relative of the "King of Tombutto" called *Abu Bacr* who was administrating the city as a lieutenant of the king. *Abu Bacr* was also known as *Pargama*. The identification of this character is difficult, but he might have been Umar Kamdiagu, the brother of Askiya Muhammad Ture, whereas *Pargama* could refer to his military title *Kurmina Fari*. Umar Kamdiagu did not reside in Timbuktu in 1512–13; he was leading a Songhay campaign in the west. He was, however, at Kabara in December 1509, so Leo might have met him during his visit to Timbuktu with his uncle in the winter of 1509–10 (see Abderrahman es-Sa'di, *Tarikh es-Soudan*, tr. O. Houdas, Paris 1900, pp.118 and 126; Mahmoûd Kâti, *Tarikh el-Fettach*, tr. O. Houdas, Paris 1913, p.145). Alternatively, Leo's *Abu Bacr* could be certain Umar b. Abu Bakr who died in 1520–21. He was no related to Askiya Muhammad Ture, but he was mysteriously called the "Sultan of Timbuktu" (es-Sa'di, *Tarikh el-Soudan*, p.131), although he was probably nothing but the governor of this city (Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu*, pp.49 and 263n.161).

<sup>24</sup> Humphrey J. Fisher, 'Leo Africanus and the Songhay Conquest of Hausaland', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, XI, 1978, p.126.

<sup>25</sup> See Masonen, *The Negroland Revisited*, pp.189–94.

<sup>26</sup> *Descrittione*, f.14, 'Ileusugagen citta in Hea'.

popularity by fighting the Portuguese who were frequently raiding the Moroccan Atlantic coast. Ahmad al-Araj was, together with his younger brother Muhammad al-Mahdi, the real founder of the Sadid dynasty which eventually overthrew the Wattasids in 1554 and unified Morocco. Ahmad al-Araj was also the Sadid ruler who was expelled from Marrakesh by the Songhay army.

From Morocco, al-Hasan b. Muhammad extended his wanderings to the eastern Maghrib and Ifriqiya, including a (second?) visit to Constantinople on a diplomatic mission on behalf of his master, Sultan Muhammad II of Fez. In the spring of 1517, al-Hasan b. Muhammad appeared in Rosetta where he witnessed the Ottoman conquest of Egypt.<sup>28</sup> The Ottomans had crushed the Mamluks in the battle of al-Raydaniyya on 22 January 1517. From Rosetta the man continued with his voyage through Cairo and Aswan and across the Red Sea to Arabia. Although he does not say so, he probably performed a pilgrimage to Mecca. Al-Hasan b. Muhammad was returning to Tunis when he fell into the hands of Christian corsairs. His more extensive travels in the Middle East—he claimed that he had even visited Persia and certain parts of Tartary<sup>29</sup>—are impossible to date or verify.

### **Papal Protégée**

The circumstances of al-Hasan b. Muhammad's capture are as unclear as other dramatic events in his life. The exact date is unknown but it took place most likely in June 1518. His captors were Spanish corsairs who were harassing Turkish vessels in the Sicilian and Greek waters. The Venetians, who also were active in the eastern Mediterranean, had renewed their peace with the Ottoman Empire in September 1517 and were unwilling to participate in any hostilities against the Turks. For a long time it was believed that al-Hasan b. Muhammad was captured near the island of Djerba, off the Tunisian coast. This universally accepted hypothesis originates from his Italian publisher.<sup>30</sup> The more probable location is further to east, near the island of Crete. The Venetian consul in Palermo recorded on 21 June 1518 that the Spanish corsair Pedro de Bobadilla, a knight of St. John, had recently captured a cargo vessel with some sixty Turks on board near the eastern end of Crete.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Abd-al-Aziz Abd-Allah Batran, 'A Contribution to the Historiography of Shaikh Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Karim ibn Muhammad (Umar-Amar) al-Maghili al-Tilimsani', *Journal of African History*, XIV, 1973, pp.381–82.

<sup>28</sup> Mauny, 'Note', p.387.

<sup>29</sup> See *Descrittione*, f.39, 'Spitali, & altri artefici'.

<sup>30</sup> See Giovanni Battista Ramusio's preface, 'All' eccellentiss. M. Hieronimo Fracastoro', in: *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, volume I, Venice 1550.

<sup>31</sup> Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, pp.64–65.

At first al-Hasan b. Muhammad was taken to Rhodes, the headquarters of the Knights of St. John.<sup>32</sup> The usual fate of those Muslim captives, who were not ransomed by their families, was slavery in Christian galleys. Al-Hasan b. Muhammad, however, ended up in Rome where he was handed to the Pope Leo X (1513–21). This happened in October 1518. An anonymous French priest, who was residing in Rome at that time, recorded the following entry in his diary:<sup>33</sup>

Towards the end of October, the brother of the bishop of Salamanca, a Spaniard and a Captain, captured on the sea a Turkish ambassador whom the Grand Turk had dispatched to the king of Tunis on the Barbary Coast. The man was taken to Rome with twelve other captives and placed in the house of the above mentioned bishop at Sant'Agostino in Rome, where the Cardinal of Nantes had once lived. Then the said ambassador was taken to the Sant'Angelo.

Similar information was recorded by the Venetian ambassador who reported in a letter to his government in early November 1518 that “Don Pietro Bovilla”, a former corsair and brother of the bishop of Salamanca, had arrived in Rome and presented a Moorish captive to the pope. The Moor was captured a few months earlier and he was said to be an ambassador of the king of Tlemcen, returning from Constantinople.<sup>34</sup> This “ambassador” must have been nobody else but al-Hasan b. Muhammad. Further evidence for this identification comes from Zanobio Acciaiuoli, the librarian of Pope Leo X. According to the librarian’s notes, a certain “Assem facchj”, who was kept in Castel Sant’Angelo, had received eight Arabic manuscripts between November 1518 and April 1519. The name, “Assem facchj”, comes definitely from “al-Hasan al-faqih”.<sup>35</sup>

The reason for al-Hasan b. Muhammad’s extraordinary fate was that his captors must have realized soon his intelligence and importance. In Rome, al-Hasan b. Muhammad was at first confined to Castel Sant’Angelo, but he was soon freed and given a handsome pension, so

<sup>32</sup> Leo writes in his “Description of Africa” that he had visited Naples in 1520. On account of this remark some scholars believed—erroneously—that he was first taken to Naples and thence to Rome where he was presented to the pope (see Massignon, *Le Maroc*, p.27; Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p.85n.376).

<sup>33</sup> Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p.60. The manuscript belongs to the Vatican Library (Ms. Barb. lat. 3552). See also Louis Madelin, ‘Le journal d’un habitant français de Rome au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle (1509–1540)’, *Mélanges d’archéologie et d’histoire*, XXII, 1902 [École française de Rome], pp.251–300.

<sup>34</sup> Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, pp.62–63. The letter is cited by the Venetian politician Marino Sanuto in his diary on 5 November 1518. The Italian documents use various forms of Bobadilla: Bovadiglia, Bovilla, etc.

<sup>35</sup> Levi Della Vida, *Ricerche*, p.100; Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p.66. The first note is dated on 24 November 1518. The epithet, faqih, refers to a person who is learned in the Quranic law. Most of the manuscripts al-Hasan b. Muhammad read, when he was kept in Castel Sant’Angelo, were texts written by Eastern Christians. His earliest surviving autograph is included in a manuscript discussing the Holy Trinity, written by St. Simeon Stylites the Elder in the 5th century AD (see footnote 8 above).

that he would not be inclined to escape.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, he agreed to convert to Christianity. Considering his delicate position, this decision was by no means surprising. Having no contacts with their country of origin nor with other Muslims, many North African slaves in Italy were easily induced to accept or suffer the conversion proposed or imposed by their masters.<sup>37</sup>

Al-Hasan b. Muhammad was baptized and received the name *Johannes Leo de Medicis*, or *Giovanni Leone* in Italian, after his noble patron, Pope Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici), or *Yuhanna l-Asad al-Gharnati*, as the man preferred to call himself in Arabic (literally: “John Leo of Granada”). The baptism took place on 6 January 1520 at the basilica of St. Peter's. The baptism was recorded by Paride de Grassi and Biagio de Martinelli, who were both masters of ceremonies in the papal court.<sup>38</sup>

The Moroccan adventurer was not the first African guest to the papal court. Leo X also patronized an Ethiopian friar (*abba*) and scholar called Thomas Walda Samuel who had collaborated with the German Orientalist Johann Potken in making the first edition of the Ethiopian Psalter in 1513.<sup>39</sup> Ethiopian pilgrims had begun to arrive in Rome in the latter half of the fourteenth century. In the late fifteenth century, there already was a large permanent Ethiopian community in Rome, to whom the church of Santo Stefano Maggiore (renamed Santo Stefano degli Abissini in 1479 by Pope Sixtus IV) and the adjoining hospice were granted. According to the decision by Pope Leo X, Brother Thomas was nominated prior of the Ethiopian community in 1518.<sup>40</sup>

The pope's benevolence toward his Moorish slave did not only spring from Christian charity and human curiosity.<sup>41</sup> Leo X is a pope for whom the historians have harsh words. He is usually depicted a “gilded butterfly”; a person whose sole interest in life was pleasure and luxurious life—love of music, drama, fine arts, literature, learning, and hunting. A seldom remembered fact is that Leo X was also a purposeful, albeit not always successful, politician

<sup>36</sup> See Ramusio, ‘All'eccellentiss. M. Hieronimo Fracastoro’, in: *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, volume I, Venice 1550.

<sup>37</sup> See Henry de Castries, ‘Trois princes marocains convertis au christianisme’, in: *Mémorial Henri Basset. Nouvelles études nord-africaines et orientales*, Paris 1928: L'Institut des haute-études marocaines, XVII–XVIII, volume I, pp.141–58.

<sup>38</sup> See Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, pp.72–74. The date and place of Leo's baptism were first introduced in modern research literature by Professor Angela Codazzi in 1933, though she offered no explicit source for her information (‘Leon Africano’, in: *Enciclopedia Italiana*, volume XX, Rome 1933, p.899).

<sup>39</sup> *Psaltarium David et Cantica aliqua*. This is the first book ever to be printed in Ethiopic and the first book to be printed in Rome in any oriental language other than Hebrew.

<sup>40</sup> Renato Levefre, ‘Note su alcuni pellegrini etiopi in Roma al tempo di Leone X’, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, XXI, 1965, pp.16–26.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Hasan b. Muhammad had an adoptive “brother” in the papal court: a Jewish musician from Florence who was baptised Johannes Maria de Medicis, also known as the Count of Verucchio (Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p.102).



whose main aim was to maintain a balance in Italy between the two formidable foreign rivals, Spain and France, and to transform his family's hold on Florence into a permanent and recognized position.

In November 1517, Leo X had started planning a crusade against the Ottomans whose recent and rapid expansion in the eastern Mediterranean had alarmed Christendom. The first target of this crusade was to attack Northern Africa, preferably as soon as possible, under the command of the Emperor Maximilian I and supported by the kings of Spain (the future Emperor Charles V), Portugal (Manuel I), and France (Francis I). This plan was not based on any religious folly but on a careful analysis on the current political situation. The priority of the North African campaign over a direct attack against the Turkish forces in the Balkans arose from the reasonable recognition of Ottoman naval supremacy in the Mediterranean, which was personified by the infamous Turkish corsair Khairreddin Barbarossa. Another reason was the idea that Northern Africa had once been a Christian land which should be reconquered from the Muslims, like the Iberian peninsula. From a much wider perspective, the conquest of Northern Africa was seen in Western Europe, since the late Middle Ages, a milestone to the eventual conquest of the Holy Land.

In August 1519, Khairreddin defeated a major Spanish expedition at Algiers, commanded by the Spanish governor of Sicily. Subsequently he became the virtual ruler of most of the Algerian coast. Later in the same year, Khairreddin offered his submission to the powerful Ottoman Sultan Selim I (1512–20), who made him the commander of the Ottoman navy and promised to send an army of Janissaries to Algiers. A Turkish invasion of Sicily and southern Italy was feared. The Turks had already attacked Apulia in the summer of 1480 and occupied the city of Otranto, which they held for more than a year. From this point of view, the arrival in Rome of a learned Moor who was willing to collaborate with the pope and his counsellors by providing them with accurate information of Northern Africa was certainly like a gift of heaven.

Leo's willingness to collaborate with the enemies of his coreligionists was neither unique nor any indication of his opportunistic character. Some forty years later, in 1559, we hear of another North African prisoner who also agreed to pass his geographical knowledge of the Islamic lands in the Mediterranean to the hands of his Christian captors. This was a certain Hajji Ahmad, whose fate resembles curiously that of Leo. Ahmad was from Tunis but he had studied at al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, before he was captured and sent to Europe, most likely to Venice. There he prepared a planisphere covering Europe, Asia, Africa, and the known parts

of America while in the custody of a “virtuous and learned gentleman”. According to Ahmad, he was promised freedom in exchange of his knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, the plan for a crusade against the Turks faded away when Sultan Selim unexpectedly died on 22 September 1520. The new ruler of the Ottoman Empire, the young Sultan Süleyman (1520–66), not yet known as the Magnificent, was falsely considered by Italian diplomats to be less warlike and energetic than his father and he was hardly expected to cause any trouble to Christendom.<sup>43</sup>

Leo Africanus spent the following three or four years travelling in Italy. The reason for his leaving Rome was the death of his patron on 1 December 1521. Pope Leo X was succeeded by the Dutchman Adrian VI (Adrian Florensz Boeyens, 1522–23), the former professor of theology at the University of Louvain in the Netherlands and tutor of the future Emperor Charles V. Before his election, Adrian had been the imperial viceroy of Spain and inquisitor-general in Aragon, Navarre, Castile, and León. Background for his election was that the papal expenditures on worldly objects had been lavish during the pontificate of Leo X, and the Curia needed drastic reform. Adrian was an ascetic and pious man, and he did his best to curb the abuses he found. The new pontiff entered in Rome on 29 August 1522 and was no doubt suspicious about the presence of a *Morisco* in the papal court. The Habsburg Spain was zealously guarded by the Inquisition and the converted Muslims were widely suspected both of insincere belief and of collaborating with Spain’s external enemies, that is the Muslim rulers of Northern Africa. Another, perhaps a more concrete reason for Leo’s leaving was the outbreak of plague which killed nearly half of Rome’s population by the end of 1523.

While in Bologna, Leo Africanus put together an Arabic-Hebrew-Latin medical vocabulary, of which the Arabic part has survived. This manuscript, now preserved in the Escorial Library in Spain (cod. Arabo 598), is an important document, because it contains Leo’s autograph, which is one of the few surviving sources for his full original Arabic name. The autograph is dated in early 930/1514 [the correct Christian date is 1524], when Leo was residing in the house of a Jewish physician and renown humanist called Jacob Mantino.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, London 1982/1994, p.152.

<sup>43</sup> Kenneth M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204–1571)*, volume III: *The Sixteenth Century to the Reign of Julius III*, Philadelphia 1984: Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society, CLXI, pp.172–98 and 234.

<sup>44</sup> “The copy of this book was done by its author who is Yuhanna l-Asad, from Granada, once called al-Hasan b. Muhammad al-Wazzan, inhabitant of Fez, on the last days of January 1514 according to the Christian era which is equivalent to the year 930 of Islamic era, in the city of Bologna in Italy, for the skilful doctor of medicine, Jacob son of Simon, of the Jewish nation, my friend.” For the Arabic text, see Miguel Casiri, *Bibliotheca arabico-hispana*, volume I, Madrid 1760, p.172; also Oumalbanine Zhiri, *L’Afrique au miroir de l’Europe: fortunes de Jean-Léon l’Africain à la Renaissance*, Geneva 1991: *Travaux d’Humanisme et Renaissance*, no. 247, p.30. Zhiri has made a tiny error in her translation: she writes “in the end of the year 1514 [à la fin de l’année 1514]”, missing the mention of the month

Their relationship seems to have been close: Mantino, too, was from Spain. When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, the family settled in Mantova. In 1534, Jacob became the personal physician to the Pope Paul III. Ten years later he moved to Venice. One his patients in Venice was the Spanish ambassador who obtained Leo's vocabulary.<sup>45</sup>

In Bologna, Leo also wrote a grammar of Arabic which is now lost, save a fragment of eight leaves.<sup>46</sup> It is uncertain whether he was travelling elsewhere in Northern Italy. There are some allusions in his work, which suggest that he might even have visited the lands beyond the Alps, though it is also possible that these references are nothing but explanatory notes added to the original text by his Italian publisher. While describing the city of Constantine in Algeria, for example, Leo wrote that "farther from the city to the east, there is a fountain of extremely cold water, and near this fountain stands a building of marble adored with hieroglyphical pictures or emblems, such as I have seen in Rome, and many other places of Europe."<sup>47</sup>

Leo Africanus reappeared in Rome perhaps in early 1526, living there under the protection of the new Medici Pope Clement VII (Giulio de' Medici, 1523–34), a cousin of Leo X, who succeeded the austere and unpopular "barbarian", Adrian VI, on 18 November 1523. The new pope had certainly known the learned Moor, while he was himself still a cardinal, though one should not overestimate Leo's role in the papal court. Modern historians of the popes, for instance, have hardly noticed his presence in Rome at all.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, it has recently been suggested that the painting entitled "Portrait of a Humanist" by the Venetian artist Sebastiano del Piombo (Sebastiano Luciani, c.1485–1547) might depict Leo Africanus.<sup>49</sup> This painting is dated to c.1520, when Piombo was working in Rome, and it now belongs to the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. An alternative identification of the portrait is Marcantonio Flaminio (1498–1550), a noted scholar and poet who was a friend of the artist. Pope Clement VII, too, was planning an expedition against the Turkish corsairs in Northern Africa, who were infesting the shores of the Papal State. In the spring of 1525, the

[January]. The Hijri year 930 ended on 28 October 1524 and thus "in the end of the year 1514 [1524]" should be AH 931.

<sup>45</sup> Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, pp.115–16.

<sup>46</sup> See Ramusio's preface in *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, volume I (1550); also Massignon, *Le Maroc*, p.9. The fragment was published in 1956 (Angela Codazzi, 'Il trattato dell'arte metrica di Giovanni Leone Africano', in: *Studi Orientalistici in onore di Giorgio Levi Della Vida*, Rome: Pubblicazioni dell'istituto per l'oriente, no. 52, volume I, pp.180–98).

<sup>47</sup> *Descrittione*, f.70, 'Constantina citta'. Similarly, in his description of Cairo, Leo wrote that the city looks like Venice, when the Nile is flooding (*Descrittione*, f.92, 'La citta uecchia della Misrulhetich'). See also Leo's description of the mosques in Fez (*Descrittione*, f.35, 'Minuta & diligente descrittione di Fez').

<sup>48</sup> Kenneth M. Setton (*op. cit.*), for instance, ignores Leo Africanus completely; Ludwig Pastor mentioned him only once, passingly, in a footnote (see *History of the Popes from the Close of the Middle Ages*, volume VIII, Freiburg 1908, p.251).

<sup>49</sup> Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, pp.78–79.

corsairs had seized a galleon belonging to the pope and taken some four hundred Christian prisoners to sell in the slave market at Tunis. Clement's campaign was, however, hindered by more serious events: the Ottoman advance in Rhodes and Hungary, the reformation in Germany, and the devastating war in Italy between the French and the imperial forces.<sup>50</sup>

Nothing is known of Leo's final years with any certainty. According to one tradition, Leo spent the remaining years of his life in Rome where he died around 1550. This tradition is based on a statement in the preface by Leo's Italian publisher, Giovanni Battista Ramusio, to the fourth edition of his description of African geography which was printed in Venice in 1588. The statement is actually an addition to the original preface, written in 1550, and made by the Venetian master printer Tommaso Giunti. An allusion to this addition is found in Giunti's own preface in the same volume. Giunti cites no authority and it seems that he was only speculating on account of Ramusio's original preface, in which the latter had merely stated that Leo had lived in Rome for a long time ("Cosi habitò poi in Roma lungo tempo"). This statement is repeated in the second (1554) and third (1563) editions. Yet in the fourth edition (1588), and in the subsequent fifth (1606) and sixth editions (1613), the sentence has been altered to indicate that Leo stayed in Rome and never set foot out of it ("Cosi habitò poi in Roma il rimanente della vita sua"). It is noteworthy that this tradition was not accepted by the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European scholars who took the trouble to trace the available information on the life of Leo Africanus.<sup>51</sup>

According to a more contemporary tradition, Leo Africanus left Rome shortly before the sack of the city by the imperial forces in early May 1527. Subsequently, perhaps in 1528, he returned to North Africa and took up residence in Tunis where he is believed to have passed away some time after the year 1550.<sup>52</sup> This tradition is based on the information recorded by the German Orientalist Johann Albrecht von Widmanstetter (1506–57) and found in the preface to his Syriac translation of the New Testament, printed in Vienna in 1555.<sup>53</sup> Widmanstetter had arrived in Italy in 1527 to study Oriental languages—Hebrew, Arabic, and Syriac—first at Turin and later at Bologna. In the summer of 1531, Widmanstetter, who was

<sup>50</sup> Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant*, III, pp.234–35.

<sup>51</sup> See for example Jean Bodin, *Methodus*, Paris 1572, pp.75 and 110; Francisco Bermudez de Pedraza, *Antiguedad y excellencias de Granada*, Madrid 1608, f.129; Paul Colomiès, *Melanges historiques*, Orange 1672, p.80.

<sup>52</sup> There is no evidence that Leo was still alive when his work was first published in Venice in 1550. The claim that Leo should have died "some time after the year 1550" is deduced from the fact that Ramusio does not explicitly state in his preface to the first edition of *Delle navigationi et viaggi* that Leo has died—nor does he explicitly state that Leo was still alive in 1550. However, this date for Leo's death has well established itself in the authoritative literature. In 1952 Ifni, which was then a Spanish colony on Moroccan Atlantic coast, issued a set of three stamps to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the death of Leo Africanus.

<sup>53</sup> *Liber Sacro Sancti Evangelii de Iesu Christo Domino et Deo nostro*.

at that time studying at Naples, decided to travel to Tunis. His intention was to meet the famous Arab scholar “Leo Eliberitanus”, as he called Leo Africanus,<sup>54</sup> who had meanwhile abandoned Christianity and re-converted to Islam. Widmanstetter was unable to fulfil his plan, and in 1532 he moved to Rome where he furthered his studies in Arabic and tried in vain to persuade Pope Clement VII to establish a school for Oriental languages.<sup>55</sup>

Widmanstetter’s information can be accepted as reliable, for he was moving in the same places and circles as Leo Africanus had done only a few years earlier, and where the latter was certainly well-remembered. Widmanstetter even had a personal connection to Leo Africanus through Cardinal Egidio Antonini of Viterbo (1465–1532),<sup>56</sup> whom Leo had taught Arabic, and who was persuading Widmanstetter to see Leo on his behalf. According to Widmanstetter, the cardinal had been the leading Arabist in Western Europe in his lifetime. Moreover, considering Widmanstetter’s own zeal for meeting Leo Africanus—he was ready to pay a visit to North Africa, a journey that was not without any hazards—he would likely have traced Leo’s residence, if the latter had been staying in Italy.

On the other hand, it seems improbable that Leo Africanus would have settled in Tunis for the rest of his life. Although he had visited Tunis before his capture, he had no personal connection to the city. Considering that his family had already left Granada, unwilling to live under Christian Spanish rule, and that he had himself forsaken Christianity, Leo (if he was in Tunis at all—there are no Tunisian records referring to him) hardly wanted to witness another Spanish conquest, as Tunis was taken by the imperial forces of Charles V in June 1535. Against this background, Raymond Mauny’s speculation that Leo eventually returned to Morocco, which had become his true home country and where his relatives were still living, sounds acceptable.<sup>57</sup> This intention was even recorded by Leo himself in his work. Referring to his lengthy travels, he concluded his ultimate wish of being returned from Europe to his own country, by God’s assistance.<sup>58</sup> It has been suggested that Leo Africanus might have actually been a certain Abu l-Qasim b. Ahmad b. Ziyad al-Andalusi al-Gharnati, whose death in Fez was recorded in 944/1537.<sup>59</sup> This identification might explain why the contemporary

<sup>54</sup> The epithet “Eliberitanus” comes from Elvira, the pre-Islamic name of Granada.

<sup>55</sup> Max Müller, *Johann Albrecht v. Widmanstetter 1506–1557. Sein Leben und Werken*, Bamberg 1908, *passim*.

<sup>56</sup> Egidio Antonini was a renowned poet whom Pope Leo X made cardinal in 1517. He is sometimes referred to as “Egidio Canisio” but this is based on an error. His real family name was Antonini (Levi Della Vida, *Ricerche*, p.106n.1).

<sup>57</sup> ‘Note’, p.385. According to Codazzi (see footnote 39 above), Leo had returned to Africa in 1529 and was still alive in 1554; after this, nothing more is heard of him. She cites no authority for her information.

<sup>58</sup> *Descrittione*, f.96, ‘Asuan citta’.

<sup>59</sup> See the introduction to the partial Castilian translation of Leo’s work, *Descripcion de Africa y de las cosas notables que en ella se enquantran por Juan Leon Africano*, Tangier 1952 [first edition Tétuan

European visitors of Fez, such as Nicolas Clénard, Diego de Torres, and Luis Mármol del Carvajal, failed to mention Leo Africanus, for he had already passed away before their arrival in Morocco. The historical novel by Amin Maalouf ends with Leo's entrance in Tunis, and thus his later years remain a mystery even in fiction. Another interesting opportunity for speculation is whether Leo had any offspring in Italy.<sup>60</sup>

### The "Description of Africa"

Upon his return to Rome from Bologna, Leo Africanus completed his description of African geography, according to his own words, on 10 March 1526.<sup>61</sup> It was believed that Leo composed the text first in Arabic, afterwards translating it into rather corrupt Italian. Leo was certainly more or less familiar with Italian before his capture. Italian was at that time the language of commerce in the Mediterranean and it was also used in Northern Africa. For a long time it was thought that Leo had already completed the full text before his capture in 1518. This hypothesis is based on Ramusio's claim in his preface to the version he published in 1550 and transmitted by other early writers mentioning Leo.<sup>62</sup> In any case, the original manuscript has hardly survived. It was most likely destroyed in 1557 in a fire, which also burnt many other manuscripts and maps amassed by Leo's Italian publisher,<sup>63</sup> although some nineteenth-century scholars had not given up all hope of discovering the original Arabic version, either in North African or European archives.<sup>64</sup> Their hope was based on a remark by Paul Colomiès (1638–92), a French reformer and Hebraist, according to whom Leo's original manuscript had belonged to Gian Vincenzo Pinelli (1535–1601), an Italian humanist and bibliophile.<sup>65</sup> After his death, Pinelli's library was purchased by Cardinal Federico Borromeo (1564–1631), who established the Bibliotheca Ambrosiana at Milan in 1609.<sup>66</sup>

The Ambrosiana possesses an anonymous Arabic manuscript containing a description of North African geography, which had once belonged to Pinelli, but it is not written by Leo

1940]: Publicaciones del Instituto General Franco de Estudios e Investigación Hispano-Arabe, seccion 6a, no.5, pp.viii and xiii.

<sup>60</sup> See Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p.91n.411.

<sup>61</sup> *Descrittione*, f.103.

<sup>62</sup> See for example Bodin, *Methodus*, p.110; and Colomiès, *Melanges historiques*, p.78.

<sup>63</sup> See Tommaso Giunti's preface to Ramusio's *Delle Navigationi et Viaggi*, volume II, Venice 1559.

<sup>64</sup> See A. Berbrugger, 'Jean-Léon l'Africain', *Revue Africaine*, II, 1858, p.362.

<sup>65</sup> *Melanges historiques*, p.79: "Jean Léon d'Afrique est un excellent historien. Il écrivit premierement son Histoire en sa langue. L'Original s'est vû dans la riche Bibliothèque du seigneur Vincent Pinelli, le Père des Muses de l'Italie."

<sup>66</sup> Stephen Roman, *The Development of Islamic Library Collections in Western Europe and North America*, London & New York 1990, pp.157–58.

Africanus.<sup>67</sup> According to Charles Schefer, the editor of a French translation of Leo's work published in 1896–98, Pinelli had indeed acquired the original Arabic manuscript. After Pinelli's death, his library was transported to Naples by three ships. One of these ships was captured by pirates who threw overboard the books, and thus the original manuscript was destroyed. Schefer gives no source for this accident, which is—like so many other aspects in the life of Leo Africanus—based on the wish to fill the many gaps in the story with events which “certainly” (*fort probablement*) took place.<sup>68</sup>

Therefore, it was a great surprise when a previously unknown Italian hand-written example of Leo's “Description of Africa” unexpectedly appeared in 1931 and it was purchased by the Biblioteca Nazionale in Rome (Ms. VE 953).<sup>69</sup> The style in this manuscript (entitled “Cosmographia & geographia de Affrica”) differs greatly from that of the Italian printed edition, but the manuscript is evidently based on the same original text written by Leo Africanus, which was later adopted by his Italian publisher. There are no significant differences in the actual content between these two versions and the manuscript is still unpublished, except for the sections and fragments describing Libya and sub-Saharan Africa which were published by Dietrich Rauchenberger with a German translation.

Opinions concerning the significance of the manuscript version vary. Editors of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* felt confident to conclude that its publication is now “hardly worthwhile”, as it has already been utilized by Alexis Épaulard for his modern French translation of Leo's work which was published in 1956.<sup>70</sup> More recently, Professor Oumalbanine Zhiri considered it “extremely lamentable” that Professor Angela Codazzi, who was planning to publish the manuscript in the 1940s, never realized her plan, despite the encouragement offered to her by other scholars. The point is, according to Zhiri, that publication of the manuscript could help us to distinguish at least some of the many changes that Ramusio has introduced to the original text.<sup>71</sup>

The appearance of this hand-written version cast a serious shadow over the reliability of the previous hypothesis of the Arabic original text. It is now considered more probable that

<sup>67</sup> Massignon, *Le Maroc*, p.23.

<sup>68</sup> Jean Leon African, *Description de l'Afrique, tierce partie du monde. Premièrement en langue Arabesque, puis en Toscane et à présent mise en François*. Nouvelle édition annotée par Charles Schefer, Paris 1896–98: Recueil de voyages et de documents pour servir à l'histoire de la géographie depuis le XIII<sup>e</sup> jusqu'à la fin du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, XIII–XV, volume I, p.xxiii.

<sup>69</sup> Angela Codazzi, 'Dell'unico manoscritto conosciuto della “Cosmografia dell'Africa” di Giovanni Leone l'Africano', in: *Comptes rendus du Congrès International de Géographie. Lisbonne 1949*, Lisbon 1952: Union Géographique Internationale, volume IV, pp.225–26. The history of the manuscript is unclear. It seems to have been preserved in the library of the monastery of San Michele, in Venice, at least up to 1777. Thereafter it passed on to Great Britain, before it was purchased by Biblioteca Nazionale. For details of the manuscript, see Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p.126ff.

<sup>70</sup> 'Leo Africanus', new edition, volume V, p.753.

Leo wrote his work directly in Italian, though he certainly relied on Arabic notes, some of which he might have composed while travelling in Northern Africa.<sup>72</sup> Leo himself wrote that he was copying funeral inscriptions in Morocco, of which he made a collection.<sup>73</sup> Editors of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* even dare to call the Italian manuscript version the original text. Their claim is perhaps too jubilant and the manuscript is more likely an example of the hand-written copies of Leo's work, which were circulating among sixteenth-century European scholars, before its printing in 1550.<sup>74</sup> It seems that Jacob Ziegler<sup>75</sup> and Giacomo Gastaldi<sup>76</sup>, for example, used Leo's text as a source for their own descriptions of Egypt and Morocco, respectively. The German geographer Ziegler was in Rome in 1521–25 and he belonged to the favourites of Leo X, whereas the Venetian cartographer Gastaldi knew Ramusio well. However, we cannot abandon entirely the hypothesis of a complete Arabic original urtext. Although there is nothing to suggest that Ramusio knew Arabic (and thus he would have been unable to translate the text in Italian), his nephew Girolamo Ramusio is reported to have spoken the language fluently.<sup>77</sup> Girolamo could have provided a translation for his uncle, which the latter afterwards edited and corrected to the final form.

Whatever language Leo Africanus may have used for the original version, his work was published in Italian, bearing the title *Della descrizione dell'Africa et delle cose notabili che iui sono, per Giovan Lioni Africano*, for the first time in May 1550 at Venice by Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1485–1557), a secretary of the Venetian Council of Ten. Ramusio was well educated and well versed in languages, and from his youth was obsessed by his interest in geography and travels. Already in early 1520s, he had conceived the ambitious plan of bringing together accounts describing the most important travels and discoveries of his own age. A similar collection containing descriptions of the recent discoveries of Alvise Cadamosto in West Africa, Christopher Columbus in the Caribbean, Pedro Cabral in Brazil,

<sup>71</sup> *L'Afrique au miroir de l'Europe*, p.53.

<sup>72</sup> The Venetian ambassador who recorded al-Hasan b. Muhammad's arrival in Rome (see footnote 34 above) reported that some Arabic texts were found with him and the pope was interested in having them translated. It is very unlikely that al-Hasan b. Muhammad would have completed his "Description of Africa" before his capture, for the text is clearly meant for European readers. However, Leo may have been thinking of writing a literary exposition of his North African travels, before his was captured. Itineraries to Mecca and travel accounts had a long tradition in Arabic literature, and such a work would certainly have interested Moroccan readers.

<sup>73</sup> *Descrittione*, f.31, 'Salla'.

<sup>74</sup> Already in 1939 Giorgio Levi Della Vida suggested (*Ricerche*, p.137ff) that the manuscript was written by a certain Elia Ben Abraham, a Maronite friar from Lebanon, who had assisted Leo in translating the Epistles of St. Paul (see footnote 108 below). See also Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p.129.

<sup>75</sup> *Terrae Sanctae quam Palestinam nominant, Syriae, Arabiae, Aegypti et Schondiae descriptio*, Strasbourg 1532.

<sup>76</sup> *La geografia di Cl. Ptolomeo*, Venice 1548.

<sup>77</sup> Guglielmo Carradori, *G.B. Ramusio. Monografia*, Rimini 1883, p.9.



and Vasco da Gama in India had been published by Fracanzano Montalboddo in Vicenza, in 1507, and it was an immense success with numerous reprints and translations into Latin, French, and German.<sup>78</sup> The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the golden age of compilations, of which the most magisterial was the *Pilgrims* by the Englishman Samuel Purchas (1577–1626). The four volumes published in 1625 summarized in nearly 2000 pages all the most important discoveries in all corners of the New and Old worlds.

Ramusio does not specify where and in which circumstances he had managed to obtain Leo's original text. In his preface, Ramusio merely remarks that the manuscript had fallen into his hands "owing to a series of accidents, which would take too long to recount".<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, we know that Ramusio visited Rome several times on business for the Venetian Republic. Although he hardly ever met Leo personally, Ramusio referred in his preface to an anonymous gentleman who had known Leo closely and who might have handed over the manuscript to Ramusio.<sup>80</sup> This gentleman could have been, for instance, Cardinal Egidio Antonini who was a diplomat in the service of the Holy See and involved in Italian politics, and who in 1531 had persuaded Albrecht von Widmanstetter to see Leo in Tunis on his behalf.

Soon after its first publication by Ramusio, Leo's description of Africa became extremely popular. According to one of his early readers, Leo Africanus had discovered a new world for Europeans, in the same sense that Columbus had found America.<sup>81</sup> This comparison was, of course, grossly exaggerated: Africa was certainly unfamiliar to sixteenth-century Europeans, but hardly unknown. Ramusio had himself understood the importance of Leo's work from the beginning. Leo is the only author whom Ramusio mentioned by name in his preface to the first volume of his great collection of travels and discoveries, *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, and it is noteworthy that the title of Leo's work is included in the sub-title of the same volume, together with a reference to Francisco Alvarez's description of Ethiopia.<sup>82</sup>

In his preface, Ramusio expressed his sincere conviction that Leo's work would not only make all the previous literature of Africa obsolete, but it would also give "great pleasure" to the lords and princes of Christendom. After all, European knowledge of Northern Africa was at that time perfunctory, despite the Portuguese and Spanish conquests on the

<sup>78</sup> *Paesi nuovamente ritrouate et nouo mondo da Alberigo Vesputio florentino intitulado.*

<sup>79</sup> 'All'eccellentiss. M. Hieronimo Fracastoro', *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, volume I.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>81</sup> Zhiri, *L'Afrique au miroir de l'Europe*, p.13.

<sup>82</sup> *nel qual si contiene la descrizione dell'Africa, et del paese del Prete Ianni, con uarii uiaggi, dal mar Rosso à Calicut, & infin all'isola Molucche, doue nascono le Spetierie, et la nauigatione attorno il mondo.* For the complete contents of the three volumes of *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, see George B. Parks, 'The Contents and Sources of Ramusio's *Navigazioni*', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, LIX, 1955, pp.279–313.

Barbary Coast. The interior was closed for Christian travellers, save some Italian traders, and the images of the area were for the most part based on the outdated ancient authors whose texts had been rediscovered and published by the Renaissance humanists. On the other hand, since the Portuguese conquest of Ceuta in 1415, the emphasis on the struggle between Christendom and Islam had shifted in the western Mediterranean from the Iberian peninsula to Northern Africa. The importance of accurate geography for successful warfare was well understood at that time; hence the “great pleasure” of Leo’s work to the Christian lords and princes.

Leo’s influence did not restrict itself only in scholars. It has been suggested, for example, that Shakespeare modelled the character of Othello on the experiences of al-Hasan b. Muhammad.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, Leo Africanus is said to have had an equally profound influence on Corneille and other famous seventeenth-century French writers.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, Leo’s most astonishing appearance in European literature was his connection to the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939). From his youth Yeats was interested in mysticism and occult. In the summer of 1912 he participated in séances, in which he started making contacts with a spirit called “Leo”. Two years later, the contact became closer and the spirit identified itself Leo Africanus and offered the poet his insights and advice. If Yeats wrote to him, Leo would respond through Yeats’s own hand. Yeats considered Leo his “Daimon”, an alter-ego and a heroic ideal. However, Leo’s influence on Yeats gradually waned and the contact ended finally by 1917.<sup>85</sup>

Ramusio’s Italian edition was reprinted in Venice five times—in 1554, 1563, 1588, 1606, and 1613—although it was not Leo’s contribution alone that made his collection so popular. The actual content of Leo’s “Description of Africa” is identical in all these editions, but there exists slight variation in the orthography and the pagination of the different printings. In the first (1550) and second (1554) editions, the text takes 103 folio pages; in the third (1563) and the three later editions, the text is compressed into 95 folios. Nonetheless, an indication of the popularity enjoyed by Leo Africanus is that his work was soon translated into major European languages, which made it even more easily available and readable for the ever-widening audience. French and Latin translations were both published in 1556, with

<sup>83</sup> Lois Whitney, ‘Did Shakespeare Know Leo Africanus?’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, xxxvii, 1922, pp.470–83. Shakespeare wrote Othello in 1604–5 and the first English translation of Leo’s description of Africa was published in 1600.

<sup>84</sup> Alia Bacar, ‘L’influence littéraire d’un fils de Grenade. Jean Léon L’Africain’, in: *Actes du V<sup>e</sup> symposium international d’études morisques sur le V<sup>e</sup> centenaire de la chute de Grenade 1492–1992*, Zaghuan 1993: Publication de CEROMDI, volume I, pp.165–68.

<sup>85</sup> See W.B. Yeats, ‘The Manuscript of “Leo Africanus”’, edited by Steven L. Adams & George Mills Harper, *Yeats Annual*, I, 1982, pp.3–46.

many reprints. They were followed by an English translation in 1600 and a Dutch one in 1665. A German translation did not appear until 1805.<sup>86</sup>

Most of the translations are of rather poor quality, being arbitrarily abridged and including many errors both in translation and in the transcription of toponyms. The Latin edition of 1556 in particular, prepared by Johannes Florianus, rector of a grammar school in Antwerp, contains many serious mistranslations, which occasionally change the original meaning entirely. He also simplified the text sometimes omitting rather important information. Unfortunately, the many errors introduced by Florianus multiplied, because his Latin translation was widely used by European scholars until the late nineteenth century, who were “too learned to understand Italian or French”. Furthermore, the English and Dutch versions were both translated from the Latin text, instead of Ramusio’s original Italian text, and thus they are nothing but secondary renderings.

Since the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century editions became inaccessible to the growing number of western readers, new editions were produced. The French translation of 1556 was reprinted in 1830. We may assume that the recent conquest of Algiers made Leo’s text interesting to French public. Not many substitutes were available. In 1814 the British expert on Morocco, James Grey Jackson, referred to Leo Africanus as “perhaps the only author who has depicted the country in its true light”.<sup>87</sup> As late as 1834 the Swedish expert on Morocco, Jacob Gråberg af Hemsö, repeated Leo’s description of Moroccan towns in his own book, as if the data were still valid and accurate.<sup>88</sup> Ramusio’s original Italian edition was reprinted in 1837. It is reported that the famous German explorer of Sudanic Africa, Heinrich Barth, had promised to produce a new English translation of Leo’s text, but this project was thwarted by his untimely death in 1865.<sup>89</sup>

In modern times, there have been several further editions. In 1896, Robert Brown edited and annotated the earlier English translation made in 1600. In 1896–98 Charles Schefer prepared a similar updated edition of French translation of 1556. A partial Castilian translation, which contains the section dealing with Morocco, appeared in 1940 and was reprinted in 1952.<sup>90</sup> A complete Castilian translation appeared in 1995,<sup>91</sup> and another in

<sup>86</sup> For bibliographical details of these and other translations of Leo’s text, see Masonen, *The Negroland Revisited*, pp.181–85.

<sup>87</sup> *An Account of the Empire of Morocco*, London, 3rd edition, p.vi.

<sup>88</sup> *Specchio geografico, e statistico dell’impero di Marocco*, Genoa.

<sup>89</sup> See Robert Brown’s introduction to Leo Africanus, *The History and Description of Africa and the Notable Things Therein Contained*, London 1896: Hakluyt Society, 1st series, XCII–XCIV, volume I, p.lxxii.

<sup>90</sup> See footnote 59 above.

<sup>91</sup> *Descripción general del África y de las cosas peregrinas que allí hay por Juan León Africano*, tr. Serafín Fanjul & Nadia Consolani, Barcelona.

2000.<sup>92</sup> The latter was based on the translation made by the Spanish arabist Luciano Rubio (1909–97). The latest French translation, based on Ramusio’s original Italian text and compared to the Italian manuscript version, was prepared by Alexis Épaulard and annotated by himself and three leading French historians of Western Africa (Théodore Monod, Raymond Mauny, Henri Lhote). It was published in two volumes in 1956 (reprinted 1980). Today Épaulard’s edition is universally considered as the most scholarly translation of Leo’s text, although its annotation is partly outdated, especially that concerning the description of Sudanic Africa. A modern English translation with new annotation is under preparation at Trent University by Canadian scholars.<sup>93</sup> An Italian reprint of Ramusio’s collection of travels and discoveries appeared in 1978–88.<sup>94</sup> A Russian translation was published in 1983,<sup>95</sup> and a new German translation in 1984.<sup>96</sup> There is even one brief African translation of Leo Africanus in Hausa, containing the section where Leo describes the Land of the Blacks; it was published in Nigeria in 1930. A complete Arabic translation appeared in 1982<sup>97</sup> but in general, Leo Africanus has been ignored in the Arab world, though some Moroccan scholars try to reclaim him to their cultural heritage.<sup>98</sup> Perhaps Leo’s conversion to Christianity is too embarrassing to modern Muslim scholars?

### **The Contents and Sources of the “Description of Africa”**

Leo divided his work into nine books, each of which was then cut up into short passages, according to the relevant geographical, political, and thematic units. The further division of each book into the short passages seems to have been introduced by Ramusio.<sup>99</sup> The first book is a general introduction to Africa, its geography and peoples, their customs, languages, and religions. The following five books focus on Northern Africa, describing the regions (or “kingdoms” as they were called by the author) of Marrakesh, Fez, Tlemcen, Tunisia, and

<sup>92</sup> Léon Africano, *Descripción de África*, Madrid. The preface is written by Amin Maalouf.

<sup>93</sup> See the website of “Leo Africanus Project”, <http://www.trentu.ca/colleges/otonabee/leo/front.htm>. Another useful website for Leo Africanus has been created by Cristel de Rouvray, <http://www.leoaffricanus.com>.

<sup>94</sup> *Navigazioni e viaggi*. A cura di Marica Milanese, 6 vols., Torino.

<sup>95</sup> Lev Afrikanskij, *Afrika – tretya chast sveta: opisanie Afriki i dostoprimechatel nostei kotorye v nei est*, tr. V.V. Matveev, Leningrad.

<sup>96</sup> *Johann Leo Africanus Beschreibung Afrikas*, tr. Karl Schubarth-Engelschall, Leipzig.

<sup>97</sup> *Wasf Ifriqiya*, tr. Muhammad Hajji and Muhammad al-Akhdar (Rabat). This translation is based on the French edition of 1956. Another Arabic translation from the same French text is reported to have been published in Saudi-Arabia in the late 1970s.

<sup>98</sup> The first study on Leo carried out by a Moroccan scholar was published in 1933 (Mohamed al Mahdi al Hajoui, *La vie de Hassan el Wazzan et ses oeuvres*, Rabat).

<sup>99</sup> Massignon, *Le Maroc*, p.23.

Libya. Furthermore, there is one book for Sudanic Africa and one of Egypt. The final, ninth book, describes the principal North African rivers, animals, plants, and minerals.

In spite of the title, Leo's work is not a comprehensive description of the entire African continent. There is no mention, for example, of Christian Ethiopia or of the lands to the south of the Sudanic zone, which already were familiar to European readers from contemporary Portuguese and Italian reports. As mentioned above, Alvise Cadamosto's description of his voyages to West Africa was first published in Italy in 1507. The first volume ("decada") of the "Asia" by Joao de Barros, which describes the advance of Portuguese discoveries on African coasts until 1498 with extensive accounts of Gold Coast, Benin, and the kingdom of Congo, was published in Portugal in 1552. "The Prester John of the Indies" by Francisco Alvares, providing an accurate description of Ethiopia, was published in Portugal in 1540.

The emphasis in Leo's work is, understandably, on Morocco: the description of Fez alone takes as much space as the two entire books reserved for Tunisia and Libya. Even if the author's primary focus is geographical, an historical aspect is always present, albeit sometimes superficially, as most passages contain at least one or two historical anecdotes related to the respective area. As to the composition and approach, Leo's work represents the traditional literary genre of "the routes and the realms" (*al-masalik wa-l-mamalik*), which was favoured by medieval Arab geographers and historians, such as Ibn Hawqal, al-Bakri, and al-Umari, whose works Leo used as sources for his own work. Hence we may characterize Leo's "Description of Africa" as the final contribution of Islamic learning to Western civilization, in the sense that it offered new, hitherto unknown knowledge to Western scholars; the end of the cultural exchange which had begun in the eleventh-century Spain and Sicily. On the other hand, Leo's work was by no means unique to his readers. Similar approach was used by many Renaissance scholars, who considered geography, ethnography, and history inseparable subjects.

Leo's knowledge was above all based on his own experiences and observations. I have already referred above to his great voyages which are supposed to have taken him almost everywhere in the Islamic Mediterranean, from southern Morocco to Arabia, and across the Sahara. The question whether these voyages represent events that really took place or whether they are just a literary invention by a cunning captive who wanted to impress his patron has some relevance when we are estimating Leo's reliability as an historical source from the point of view of modern historiography. Considering, however, his reputation and influence on the development of European geography of Africa, the question is less meaningful. Until the early nineteenth century, Leo's European readers were not capable of distinguishing facts from fiction in his text, any more than medieval readers had been able to separate reality from

imagination in Marco Polo's "Travels". This concerns particularly Leo's description of the city of Timbuktu, which he depicts as an African version of Zipangu.

According to Leo, the inhabitants of Timbuktu were amazingly rich and the king of Timbuktu possessed an ingot of gold that weighed over five hundred kilograms.<sup>100</sup> Originally this piece of gold was one of the fabulous stories about the Sudanic Africa circulating in medieval Arabic sources and it became heavier with each telling but not less credible. Supported and magnified by constant flow of new reports sent by European traders and consuls from Northern Africa, Leo's description came to represent European readers the treasures which were available, and waiting to be discovered, in the West African interior.<sup>101</sup> Timbuktu itself transformed into a wonderful magnet which attracted Europeans adventures to suffer the hardships—and often the death—of crossing the vast tracts of desert. It was not until 1830 when European readers were finally told by the French adventurer René Caillié (1799–1838) that Timbuktu was a rather poor town consisting of nothing but “a mass of ill-looking houses, made of earth”.<sup>102</sup> Caillié was certainly not the first European to arrive in Timbuktu on 20 April 1828, but he was the first who came back alive to tell what he had seen there.

Besides Leo's own experiences and observations, another important source of information was the earlier Arabic literature which was familiar to him through his education, even if he hardly had any relevant reference works available to him in Italy. Leo mentions in his two surviving works sixty-two Arabic and Hebrew authors by name altogether, of whom twenty-six appear in his “Description of Africa” and forty-three in his biographical work (see below).<sup>103</sup> Most of these authors are poets, theologians or jurists (such as Averroes, Avicenna, al-Farabi, al-Ghazali, Malik b. Anas, and Maimonides) who had little or no value as sources for North African geography and history. In fact, there are surprisingly few direct references to Arabic writers whose works are important in relation to the contents of the “Description of Africa”, namely al-Bakri, al-Idrisi, and Ibn Khaldun. Furthermore, the “Description of Africa” contains references to three anonymous Arabic texts and to four classical sources (Livy, Pliny the Elder, Claudius Ptolemy, and an anonymous Latin text). However, we may suppose that Leo certainly knew more Arabic works than those he mentioned by name, though he seems to have been ignorant of the narrative of the great fourteenth-century Moroccan globetrotter Ibn

<sup>100</sup> *Descrittione*, f.84, ‘Tombutto Regno’.

<sup>101</sup> See Eugenia Herbert, ‘Timbuktu: A Case Study of the Role of Legend in History’, in: B.K. Swartz Jr & R.E. Dumett (eds), *West African Cultural Dynamics. Archaeological and Historical Perspectives*, The Hague 1980, pp.431–54.

<sup>102</sup> *Journal d'un voyage à Tombouctou et à Jenne pendant les années 1824–1828*, 3 vols., Paris 1830.

<sup>103</sup> For a comprehensive list of Leo's sources, see Massignon, *Le Maroc*, pp.36–40.

Battuta who could have offered him a lot of useful historical background data for both the Northern and the Sudanic Africa.

## Other Works

Although the “Description of Africa” is Leo’s most famous work, it is not his sole literary achievement. From internal references we know that Leo Africanus was planning to supplement his description of African geography with two other volumes: the first was to be a description of the places he had visited in the Middle East and the second a similar description of Europe.<sup>104</sup> Nothing came of out of this plan, which was probably interrupted by the unexpected opportunity to return to his native land after the sack of Rome. He also wrote—or at least intended to write—an exposition of the Islamic faith<sup>105</sup> and a history of North Africa.<sup>106</sup> Neither of these works, if he ever completed them, has survived.<sup>107</sup>

Besides his *magnum opus* and the brief medical vocabulary mentioned above, there are two other surviving texts from Leo Africanus. One is an Arabic translation of the Epistles of St. Paul, which is dated in January 1521. This manuscript belongs to the Biblioteca Estense in Modena (Ms. or. I.6.3.) and it contains Leo’s Latin autograph: “Jo[ha]n[nes] leo servus medecis”.<sup>108</sup> The other is a biographical encyclopaedia of twenty-five remarkable Islamic and five Jewish scholars, which he allegedly completed in Rome, before he left the city in the spring of 1527. The original text exists in two manuscripts preserved in Florence<sup>109</sup> and in Kassel<sup>110</sup>. The text was published in Latin under the title *Libellus de viris quibusdam illustribus apud Arabes*, first in Zurich in 1664 by Johann Heinrich Hottinger,<sup>111</sup> and for the second time in Hamburg in 1726 by Johann Albert Fabricius.<sup>112</sup> However, compared to the “Description of Africa”, Leo’s biographical work was hardly noticed by the early Orientalists. Neither has the text any value as an historical source, for Leo’s information of the persons whose lives he describes is often rather erroneous. The obvious explanation is that Leo had no relevant sources available to him in Rome and he had to trust in his memory only.

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<sup>104</sup> *Descrittione*, f.96, ‘Asuan citta’.

<sup>105</sup> *Descrittione*, f.8, ‘Lettere usale da gli Africani’.

<sup>106</sup> *Descrittione*, f.20, ‘La gran citta di Marocco’.

<sup>107</sup> Massignon, *Le Maroc*, p.9. According to Codazzi (‘Leon Africano’, p.899), Leo had already written both these works before his capture, though she provides no evidence for her claim.

<sup>108</sup> Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p.83.

<sup>109</sup> Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (Ms. Plut. 36.35. Ms. 184).

<sup>110</sup> Murhadsche und Gesamthochschul-Bibliothek (Ms. hist. litt. 7 (4°)).

<sup>111</sup> *Bibliothecarius quatripartitus*, pp.246–91.

<sup>112</sup> *Bibliotheca Græcæ*, volume XIII, pp.259–98.

Leo Africanus should not be viewed only as a curious anecdote who belongs to the national biographies of Spain, Morocco, and Italy, and to the historiography of travels and discoveries. His life and work still has a relevance to our own times. Leo Africanus is a splendid example of the passage of men and of intellectual elements between the two shores of the Mediterranean. The experiences of Leo Africanus clearly prove that the religious, ethnic, and cultural borders between the Islamic and Christian worlds were not insuperable even in the distant past—and nor should they become insuperable in the near future either. He was not, however, a true Renaissance man who embraced the values of Renaissance Italy to the point of rejecting his old customs. Nor was he any paragon of a modern cross-cultural cosmopolite who was at home wherever he went. The originality of Leo Africanus lies in the fact that he wrote his work in Europe, and was most influential there, despite the man himself belonged intellectually to the Arab world. On the other hand, it is also noteworthy that Leo evidently made no attempt to share his knowledge of Italy and other Christian lands with his North African compatriots. But this was by no means extraordinary. While Christians returning from the Barbary Coast or Turkey produced an extensive literature describing their experiences and the peoples among whom they had lived, Muslim ex-prisoners returning from Europe have left virtually no record.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery*, p.90.