

The research on Giovan Leone L'Africano was for a long time dominated by French scholars and authors, and not only because the first French translation was already available in 1553, only three years after the first printing of the *Description of Africa* by Ramusio.¹⁰⁸ Studies like the doctoral dissertation of Louis Massignon,¹⁰⁹ produced in the context of French colonial policy, or the editorial works and translations of Alexis Epaulard¹¹⁰ had contributed to an improved state of the knowledge surrounding the figure of the traveling Granadian so shrouded in numerous legends. A new edition of the translation provided by Epaulard of the learned man's *Description de l'Afrique* appeared in 1980, almost, as it happens, simultaneously with a translation into Arabic that same year.¹¹¹

If one traces back the history of the *Descrittione dell'Africa*, one may become convinced, in light of the current state of research, that the text made famous by Giovanni Battista Ramusio was written by al-Wazzan in Italian and completed between 1524 and 1526. Not only its having been published in Ramusio's notable collection from the fifties, but the context of the origin of the *Description of Africa* some quarter-century earlier puts the immediate context of the travels and writings of Joannes Leo Africanus, from the transareal perspective chosen for the present work, in the first phase of accelerated globalization. Moreover, his report is also a component of the wave of occidental expansion, to the power and dispersal of which he directly or indirectly gives witness.

Since 1986 and the appearance of the truly accomplished and successful debut novel *Léon l'Africain* by the Lebanese-born writer Amin Maalouf,¹¹² a far more comprehensive and penetrating examination of the Moorish Andalusian may be discerned. Possibly the best examples to mention might be the 1991 work of the Moroccan Oumelbanine Zhiri,¹¹³ which investigated the centuries-long effect of the printed works of al-Wazzan on the image of Africa in Europe,

108 C.f. Dietrich Rauchenberger: *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p. 153.

109 See Louis Massignon: *Le Maroc dans les premières années du XVIe siècle. Tableau géographique d'après Léon l'Africain*. Alger: Typographie Adolphe Jourdan 1906.

110 See Jean-Léon l'Africain: *Description de l'Afrique*. Translated from the Italian by Alexis Epaulard and annotated by Alexis Epaulard, Théodore Monod, Henri Lhote, and Raymond Mauny. Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient 1956.

111 See Dietrich Rauchenberger: *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner*, p. 155.

112 See also the third chapter, "Positionen," in Ottmar Ette: *ZusammenLebensWissen. List, Last und Lust literarischer Konvivenz im globalen Maßstab*.

113 Oumelbanine Zhiri: *L'Afrique au miroir de l'Europe: Fortunes de Jean Léon l'Africain à la Renaissance*. Geneva: Librairie Droz 1991; see also Oumelbanine Zhiri: *Les sillages de Jean Léon l'Africain: XVIe au XXe siècle*. Casablanca: Wallada 1995.

the 2006 book by the Princeton researcher Natalie Zemon Davis,¹¹⁴ which, though impaired by some technical errors, is interesting in terms of cultural theory, and above all, the comprehensive biographical and editorial examination from 1999 by the career officer and diplomat, Dietrich Rauchenberger.¹¹⁵

Even just the research of Rauchenberger has given us a much more precise knowledge of the travels of al-Hassan al-Wazzan into the African interior. The way that Joannes Leo Africanus imagined the African continent and its outlines at the time that he wrote his *Description* is thereby not merely graphically presented in an imaginary map;¹¹⁶ in an itinerary overview, the courses of the long journeys in the Sahara that have long been known or can be directly deduced are arranged such that it becomes clear what immense surfaces of the continent the multilingual writer covered, whether on foot or on the backs of camels.

Al-Hassan made the first of his extended journeys in the years 1507 and 1508, but to Constantinople, Mesopotamia, Armenia, Persia, and Tartary.¹¹⁷ He then undertook his second trip in the company of his uncle around 1510, across the Sahara to Timbuktu, where his relative had been sent on a diplomatic mission by the Moroccan sultan. The third journey, probably between 1512 and 1514, first brought him once more trans-Sahara to Timbuktu, but then ran through the Haussa States and the region around Lake Chad, then farther eastward to Egypt. The fourth and last of his great journeys took al-Hassan al-Wazzan, at most only 25 years old, once again into North Africa and that region to which we today, from a Eurocentric perspective, like to refer as the Near East.

From Egypt, the faithful Muslim made a pilgrimage to Mecca, then started home. But he would never reach Fez. Presumably during a detour on the Mediterranean island of Djerba, he was taken captive by Christian corsairs under the command of Pedro de Bobadilla and carried away to Italy as a slave in 1518. There he was handed over as a sort of living present—a practice not uncommon for the time—to Pope Leo X, who is known for his courtly extravagance and support of the arts. This was the decisive event that turned the Granadian into an African.

It was this same Leo X who came forth both as a friend and supporter of the arts and sciences, and who, as the great Pope of the Renaissance, declared Mar-

114 C.f. Natalie Zemon Davis: *Trickster Travels. A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds*.

115 C.f. Dietrich Rauchenberger: *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner. Seine Beschreibung des Raumes zwischen Nil und Niger nach dem Urtext*.

116 Ibid. p. 195.

117 Karl Schubarth-Engelschall: "Leo Africanus und seine 'Beschreibung Afrikas.'" In: Johannes Leo Africanus: *Beschreibung Afrikas*, pp. 7–18.

tin Luther anathema and instituted the famous heresy trial. But this Medici Pope met very openly with the Muslim al-Hassan al-Wazzan: he recognized in him a young scholar educated in matters worldly and religious, to whom he gladly provided all possibilities for further education in his noble prison, the Castel Sant'Angelo, in order, if possible, to secure his knowledge and to convert him into a Christian. The interests involved were clear. From many statements, diplomatic and otherwise, we know that the "conversion" of al-Hassan al-Wazzan, follower of the prophet Mohammed, and his baptism as Giovan Leone at the Holy See was an international event, discussed in many parts of Christendom, that stood very much at the heart of the tense power struggle between Orient and Occident.

In this variation of the East-West conflict, there definitely existed a sustained interest in (the knowledge of) the Other. Thus did the young man from Granada, who once again found himself on the northern side of the Mediterranean, very quickly move into a position as a broker and translator between the occidental and oriental worlds. In 1524, Joannes Leo Africanus, under the personal protection of "his" Pope, authored, among other things, an Arabic-Hebrew-Latin-Spanish word-list (as a collaborator), and his *Description of Africa*, which won him, as the source of knowledge of the continent that lay so near and yet was so unknown, the by-name "Africanus." For good reason, he wrote and dictated his *Descrizione dell'Affrica e delle cose notabili che quivi sono* not in his native tongue, but in that idiom in which he had been instructed in Rome from the beginning: the transcultural dimension of his life's path connects in a very natural way to the translingual composition of his chief work. And this chief work is still alive for the reading public of today.

As a Muslim born in Granada, al-Hassan al-Wazzan had undoubtedly grown up in variously close contact with Arabic and its variants, with Berber, Spanish, and with manifold hybrids of all these languages. On his extended travels, he became familiar with a multitude of African languages before he came to be instructed in Latin and Italian in the Castel Sant'Angelo in papal Rome, and began to read books and manuscripts in these "occidental" languages. As a polyglot scholar and reader he was thus highly sensitized to all forms of inter-and translingual linguistic phenomena, as much for asymmetric language contact as for the various problems of translation. It seems to have quickly become clear to him that his opportunity lay just here.

Constant reflections on language consequently pervade all of his work. His *Descrizione* is therefore not only about the geographical and topographical frontiers of Africa, about its climate and soil, vegetation and crops, about the great rivers, the animals characteristic of the continent, about the different peoples

and their trade goods, but also about the differentiating cultural attributes which are primarily noted and examined with respect to language. So it is that in “all the African countryside that stretches from the Mediterranean to the Atlas Mountains,[...] “a corrupted Arabic is spoken,” where only “in the kingdom of Morocco and in Numidia...the Berber tongue is more widespread.”¹¹⁸ “The Arab historians” Giovan Leone continues, maintain “emphatically that the Africans have had no other writing than that with Latin letters;” that they indeed have spoken other languages, but that they “made use of Latin letters, as do the Germans in Europe.”¹¹⁹ And in a thoroughly critical appraisal of the sources, he remarks that without exception all “history books on the Africans that the Arabs possess” are translations from the Latin, “old works, written in the time of the Aryans, some still earlier.”¹²⁰

Although the Africa that Joannes Leo Africanus presents to his contemporary reading public is shaped by the notion of plenty that includes landscapes and rivers, flora and fauna, but also peoples, cultures, and languages, it is not without the element of the pitfall, for in the northern part of the continent the symptoms of syphilis, which had been unknown in these regions before, have long since emerged.

In considering this epidemic characteristic of the first phase of accelerated globalization, which in other European sources is consistently ascribed to “the Others,” we move from a transareal perspective such as we can find throughout Ramusio’s anthology *in nuce* to the contemporary discussion of this world-wide spreading contagion which, outside of France, was designated as *morbo gallico*, the French disease, though the Portuguese liked to call it the Castillean disease, while the Scots were more likely to call it the Norwegian disease. For his part however, Giovan Leone L’Africano tended to align himself with the rumors circulating through the Arab world:

The French disease is widespread in the Berber regions. Only a few inhabitants escape it. It causes boils and ulcers. Out in the country and in the Atlas Mountains, hardly anyone suffers from it. Also among the Arabs, in Numidia, in Libya, and in the land of the blacks, this evil is unknown. Yes, the afflicted are brought even to Numidia and Nigritia, because the local air makes them well. I myself have seen some hundreds of persons healed merely through the change of air and no other means. Originally, the epidemic was not known by name in Africa itself. It was carried there by the Jews who had been driven out of Spain by King Ferdinand. Many of them were sick, and the lustful Moors infected themselves with

118 Johannes Leo Africanus: *Beschreibung Africas*, p. 72.

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid.

the Jewesses who had come to Africa, such that soon no family in the Berber regions was spared from the evil. In the beginning, those who were afflicted with the French disease were viewed as victims of leprosy, and were driven from their homes and forced to live among the Lepers. But as the number of sick grew daily and a great many people fell ill, the sick began again to lead their normal lives, and the outcasts returned to their homes. It is believed without a doubt that the disease came from Spain, and it is thus called the Spanish disease. In Tunis, where it raged for some time, in Egypt and Syria, as in Italy, it is called the French disease.¹²¹

Many aspects of both the forms of reporting and the (mostly transitory) norms of coexistence that came about from the spread of this contagion may be brought into connection with those forms and norms in the second, third, and fourth phases of accelerated globalization that, like those of the first, were reactions to epidemics and pandemics as being fundamental symptoms and fears of globalization. In this respect, the *Description of Africa* provides us not only with an exciting contemporary insight into the problems of a globalization that in the “Old World”—just think of the bio-politics that rapidly set in upon the importation of black men and women as slaves to the “New World”—certainly did not stop before reaching the African continent. At the same time, this work from the mid-twenties of the 16th century illustrates for us through literary means the great variety of areas in which norms of life and forms of life began to change under the influence of the first phase of accelerated globalization. While on one end of the world the advancing Turks sought to control all land-based trade connections between Asia and Europe, on the other end of the world, the Iberian powers also established their dominance, indeed, over the lands of spices. Within a few decades, the Earth had become a different world.

Al-Hassan al-Wazzan is, beyond any doubt, an extraordinary author and personality. One should not however draw from this the erroneous conclusion that his life itself, and with it his knowledge for living, are completely separate from the framework of the circumstances of his time. For in *his* time of wars and banishments, of pogroms and migrations, of slave-hunts and exoduses, of famines and forced conscriptions, such life-paths are not really singular. From today’s perspective, would not the paths of thousands upon thousands of simple sailors or mercenaries, galley slaves or merchants, sutlery women, prostitutes, or nuns seem no less “adventurous”?

But far beyond his time in the first phase of accelerated globalization, what still fascinates about the figure of Leo Africanus is the fact that, in his translingual function as a writer between Europe, Africa, and Asia, he knew how to de-

121 Ibid. p. 75.

velop a form of Writing-between-Worlds that we, from the viewpoint of the current fourth phase of accelerated globalization, can probably more precisely and sensitively grasp, thanks to the reconstruction of the specific historical contexts, than those of other, less “moving,” less “velociferous” times. From the necessity of having to change continents and languages, cultures and religions, in order to survive, al-Hassan al-Wazzan, alias Joannes Leo Africanus developed the transcultural virtue of generating, between South and North, between East and West, a work of translation that crosses cultures and modes of expression and makes of him one of the most dazzling seminal figures of the first phase of accelerated globalization. For his *Descrizione dell’Affrica* is far more than a mere description of Africa: it models through the means of literature, from a transareal perspective *avant la lettre*, the complexity of the old in the light of an emerging new world.