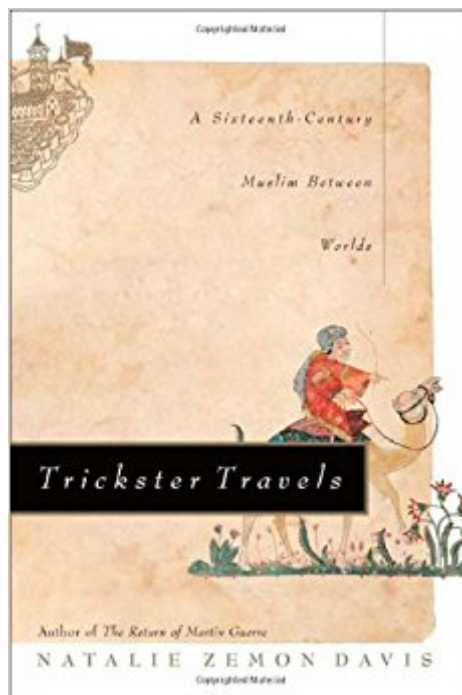




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# Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds



## Synopsis

An engrossing study of Leo Africanus and his famous book, which introduced Africa to European readers. Al-Hasan al-Wazzan--born in Granada to a Muslim family that in 1492 went to Morocco, where he traveled extensively on behalf of the sultan of Fez--is known to historians as Leo Africanus, author of the first geography of Africa to be published in Europe (in 1550). He had been captured by Christian pirates in the Mediterranean and imprisoned by the pope, then released, baptized, and allowed a European life of scholarship as the Christian writer Giovanni Leone. In this fascinating new book, the distinguished historian Natalie Zemon Davis offers a virtuoso study of the fragmentary, partial, and often contradictory traces that al-Hasan al-Wazzan left behind him, and a superb interpretation of his extraordinary life and work. In *Trickster Travels*, Davis describes all the sectors of her hero's life in rich detail, scrutinizing the evidence of al-Hasan's movement between cultural worlds; the Islamic and Arab traditions, genres, and ideas available to him; and his adventures with Christians and Jews in a European community of learned men and powerful church leaders. In depicting the life of this adventurous border-crosser, Davis suggests the many ways cultural barriers are negotiated and diverging traditions are fused.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Davis (*The Return of Martin Guerre*) performs a sterling service in disentangling the twisted threads of al-Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Wazzan's fascinating life. Better known in the West as Leo Africanus, he was one of the Renaissance's greatest geographers and the author of a Europe-wide bestseller, *The Description of Africa* (1550). Born a Muslim in Granada in 1492,

al-Hasan al-Wazzan traveled widely as an ambassador and merchant throughout Africa, a continent then a mystery to Europeans, but was captured by Spanish pirates in 1518, presented to Pope Leo X and ostensibly converted to Christianity while explaining Islam to his bewildered audience.

Al-Hasan al-Wazzan had the (mis)fortune to live in "interesting times": the Ottomans were on the march, the Habsburgs were on the rise and the Protestants were alarming the pope, yet al-Hasan al-Wazzan managed to flit among a myriad of worlds (including, Davis speculates, taking a formerly Jewish wife). Eventually, he returned to a North Africa riven by turmoil and slaughter, and disappeared from our view. He rose above hard-drawn lines and presented "himself simply as an independent polymath," says Davis, and his life provides a lesson in the "possibility of communication and curiosity in a world divided by violence." 16 pages of b&w illus., 2 maps. (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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In 1518, al-Hasan al-Wazzan, a diplomat of the Sultan of Fez, was kidnapped in the Mediterranean by pirates, who brought him to Pope Leo X. Al-Wazzan had travelled extensively in Africa, and was able to provide firsthand intelligence on the geography and politics of the infidel region. Leo Africanus, as he became known, remained in Rome for the next nine years, converted from Islam to Christianity (he was baptized by the Pope himself), and compiled his "Description of Africa," a collection of learning, hearsay, and personal anecdote that shaped European ideas about Africa for centuries. Few facts exist to illuminate Leo's actual life in Rome, but Davis fills us in on the scholars with whom he may have conversed and the social mores to which he would have had to adjust, arriving at a portrait of "a man with a double vision," straddling two warring cultures. Copyright © 2006 The New Yorker --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Natalie Zemon Davis is not the first historian to examine the life al-Wazzan. Her contribution to the study of early modern history comes, rather, from her interpretation of al-Wazzan's life. She suggests that al-Wazzan's conversion was not completely genuine. Caught between the tensions and contradictions of the Christian and Islamic worldviews, al-Wazzan, Davis argues, attempted to avoid public conflict and denouncement of either religion. In his writings, he attempted to "build a bridge for himself, one that he could cross in either direction" (114). His writings are, therefore, esoteric. They employ the Arabic concept of hila, or stratagem. On the one hand, his scholarship integrated Arabic storytelling into the Western world, synthesizing Christian and Muslim thought. On the other hand, al-Wazzan wrote his

treatises carefully and cautiously, lest Christians or Muslims challenged his orthodoxy. Davis argues convincingly that al-Wazzan's corpus needs to be examined with his autobiography in mind. While Davis's book is engaging, "Trickster Travels" partakes in several of the pitfalls of cultural history. Above all, Davis employs too much conjecture in her book. For example, in her long and virtually unnecessary chapter on sex, Davis, drawing on the slang al-Wazzan uses in his "Geography," raises the possibility that al-Wazzan frequented the brothels of Rome and Africa and that he may have engaged in homosexual activity or had suppressed homoerotic desires. While he may have had such tendencies, Davis does not provide enough evidence to support this claim. The second pitfall of cultural history present in Davis's book is that the modern concept of identity is imposed on al-Wazzan's life. Although Davis does show that al-Wazzan realized that he was caught in between worlds, she does not demonstrate that al-Wazzan viewed himself as an individual in the modern sense of the word. Al-Wazzan seems less concerned with identity politics and more concerned with the more philosophical question of what is truth. These faults aside, Davis's book is a fine monograph. Davis's prose is clear and easy to read. The book, printed by a major publishing house, is accessible to a wide reading audience and could be used in an undergraduate class to introduce students to global history in the sixteenth century. Despite being a work of popular history, the work is an impressive product of world-class scholarship. There are one hundred pages of notes, a small glossary of Arabic words, and an extraordinary bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

A monumental square peg of scholarship pounded into a small round hole of fragmental biography. Much interesting history here, but in the aggregate it is incoherent and does not substitute for a credible biography. Too little is known about the nebulous figure Leo Africanus, in fact, to write a biography, and (as others have noted) amassing tangential historical information is fruitless; tacking such on to what poses as biography with endless phrases like "probably did", "may well have seen", "might well have known" is tantamount to historical fiction, yet lacks the coherence of that genre. In short, a frustrating book that shouldn't have been.

Davis is something of a trickster herself. Her favorite "trick" is to illuminate past and present by digging into obscure lives and hidden corners of history. "The Return of Martin Guerre" is the best-known instance, but "TT" does the same for a more prominent 16C figure who proved adept at

negotiating different cultures and faiths. The evidence for Leo Africanus's life is lamentably thin, but NZD addresses this issue by crafting a life-&-times study. It's also a biography of a book, not just the author. Plentiful detail on the Mediterranean world in that era shows how his career progressed as scholar and cultural go-between, allowing us to see why his "Description of Africa" became the first classic general work on the continent. It is especially valuable because he lived in Africa for lengthy periods, comprehending the continent as denizen and witness as well as scholar. NZD's own career has been brilliantly innovative, which seems to puzzle more conventional minds. Nevertheless she memorably expands our appreciation of what history can do, and be. Write on!

This book does its best to wipe the cobwebs off the figure generally known in the West as Leo Africanus, a man raised in Fez by a family displaced from Muslim Spain during the Christian conquest, who travels widely as a diplomat through Africa, and then is brought to Rome as a captive where he authors a number of fascinating books, including a book on Africa and his African travels. This is a meticulously researched book, replete with voluminous footnotes full of both detail and inciteful asides. However, the book is doomed to fail in its central project from the outset: even after the author's diligent research and careful writing, Leo Africanus remains hidden behind the folds of Leo's gown. The underlying documentation of his life is simply too sparse. Too much of "Trickster" is too speculative. Too little of the book relies on quotations of the subject's own words. Too many threads are started but then reluctantly abandoned by Zemon-Davis because of unavailable or incomplete sources. Most of what survives today of Leo Africanus is simply his work, his books written in Rome, and getting beyond the work to the man himself may simply be beyond the ability of any historian. However, Zemon-Davis is crystal clear throughout the book as to where she is speculating or supposing and where she has evidence, and what her evidence is, and she does incorporate a number of useful quotations. Every sentence of this book is the work of a truly diligent professional historian. While failing in its central project, the book succeeds in helping us to visualize and understand key elements of the age, and Zemon-Davis does a great job (particularly in those wonderful footnotes) of bringing to life both the life of an Andalusian family in Fez and the life of intellectual circles in 16th century Rome. Reading the book, I was struck on page after page with interesting thoughts and questions; the book truly sparked my curiosity. What of all those differing translations of Leo Africanus' work? What might they say about the societies in which they were written? What of all that poetry referenced by Leo Africanus? How did that Arabic poetic sensibility influence the Christian regions it touched? And What of those African civilizations he visited? I am left wondering if this very good book Zemon-Davis has written might have been a truly great book if

its focus shifted just slightly from this fascinating but inscrutable man, perhaps acknowledging and acceding to the limitations of the existing research material. Her title refers to "a sixteenth-century muslim between worlds", but it is the two worlds more than the subject himself that she best elucidates. And so, despite its flaws, reading this book has been a pleasure, and I can recommend the book to others very highly, though I still suspect that had the author conceived the work as more of a history and less of biography, it just might have been a classic on the same scale as her "Return of Martin Guerre." And so I withhold the fifth star, and give this one a very solid four stars.

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