

Leo Africanus Talk
Ann Arbor; March 2005

1. Introduction:

[SLIDE 1 Title Page]

Tonight I will talk about Leo Africanus – the man behind the novel you have read. I will tell you a bit about his life and the world he lived in, but also about the way we have come to know him, the way in which historians have put together the chards of evidence that make up a biography, an identity. My intention to focus on both what we know, and how we know it derives quite naturally from what I learned building this website – I spent 9 months in Morocco, reading about Leo Africanus; meeting Moroccan, French and American experts; reading the French translation of his 16th century writings; and retracing his footsteps through the country, comparing what I saw to what he described. Doing this, I felt closer to this intriguing character, but I also became quite aware of the process by which we construct historical knowledge, disseminate it and use it for contemporary purposes.

So tonight I want to use Leo, this website, and the experience of building it as a window into the nature of creating, disseminating and using historical knowledge in the 21st century.

2. Leo Africanus

[SLIDE 2 Name Slide]

This picture is a copy of the signature at the end of an Arab-Hebrew-Latin dictionary that Leo Africanus presumably authored.

What may be his own hand, we read his two names (In green I have added suffixes which he used on other occasions, or as signatures to his other books)

The Italian, most recent name: Johanes Leo el Granati
I.e. John, Leo, de Medici (adopted by pope who gave him all his names)
from Granada (town in Spain where he was born)

The Arabic name he was born with:

Hassan Ibn Mohammad Ibn Ahmed al Wazzan al Zayatti al Fassi

le; his first name was Hassan, his father's name was Mohammad, his grandfather Ahmed. He came from Fes (not Granada); and the labels "wazzan" and "zayatti" are indications of the lineage, tribe, clan he belonged to:

Wazzan was his clan's name; and historians have interpreted "Zayatti" to actually be Zenati = a very large Berber clan, that included not only the Wazzans, but the Beni Watta and Beni Merin (two dynasties that ruled Morocco from Fes in the 13th and 14th centuries).

Africanus means BERBER; not pejorative – in his own text, when he uses the word African, he means people who lived in North Africa before the Arabs arrived from the Arabian Peninsula; people who spoke Berber (what was, and is still called the Noble tongue).

[SLIDE 3 READ SLIDE FROM LEO TEXT]

So Leo was not ethnically Arab, though he appeared close to both Berber and Arabic identities; in particular as it pertained to the intellectual, civilized, urban Arabic elite (education in Medersa, honorific title of scholar typical of Arab civilizations throughout the Realm of Islam).
AMBIGUITY and DOUBLE IDENTITIES RUN THROUGHOUT LEO'S PERSONA.

So how did Leo come to acquire two names? His names are indications of his life

[SLIDE 4 map]

Born in Granada – mid 1490s; the town had just been seized by the Catholic Queen Isabelle and husband Ferdinand, thus closing the last enclave of Muslim rule on European territory, putting an end to nearly 7 centuries of Muslim presence in Spain.

Migrate to Fes – not fleeing; for a while Muslims, Catholics and Jews lived in peace and official protection from catholic rulers; persecution of non Catholics in Granada would start in early 1500s. Hassan's family leaves for Morocco probably because they are well connected with ruling Fassi dynasty – this is one interpretation of his name "Al Wazzan" – from the Berber Wazzani tribe, one of the three main noble lineages in Northern Morocco (Wattasides and Merinides were the others). In any case, his writings indicate a comfortable childhood; he claims his father owned land in the Fes region; and his uncle was an ambassador for the Sultan.

Travels - Pilgrimage to Mecca: according to Leo, at the age of 11 – i.e. in 1506 – he traveled to Mecca, for the Hajj. He also claims that he went his the sons of a very powerful southern Moroccan family – the Saadiens, who would slowly take over from the Fassi Sultan in the 16th century. Another indication of his relatively high place in Moroccan society.

- His second big trip seems to have been an expedition to the Sudan, with his uncle – a several month caravan trail through the Sahara to Timbuktu.

Capture – 1518; on his way back from Constantinople, the Knights of Malta captured his ship and he was brought to Rome, and given to Pope Leo X. His arrival was noted in several diaries of Roman citizens as having been a notable event. He then spent over a year in a papal residence – the Castello Sant Angello, where he apparently was giving numerous Arabic manuscripts to study and translate – historians have found these manuscripts with annotations they recognized as Hassan’s handwriting.

[SLIDE 5 Picture of Pope Leo X]

Baptism, Adoption, Conversion – in June 1520, Leo was baptized and adopted by the Pope, who gave him both his names: Yohannes (John) and Leon (Leo); the issue of the sincerity of the conversion is rather problematic, and different historians in different centuries have had different interpretations. Perhaps the most extreme was the 1588 re-edition of Leo’s text (it was a best- seller almost instantaneously) that claimed that Leo died in Rome, a faithful catholic. More recent interpretations have stressed the ambiguity of Leo’s character, and his repeated insistence, in his text, that he will return “home” in some near future.

[SLIDE 6 Picture of his book]

Writing - Leo X died in 1521, and Leo seems to have had several difficult years subsequently (on a financial level); he traveled to Bologna, to Venice, and took on several scholarly commissions – for example a Latin, Hebrew, Arabic dictionary (in collaboration with other scholars). His most extensive work was the *Cosmographia Dell’ Affrica* – a 1000 page manuscript in which he describes the parts of North and sub-Saharan Africa he either personally visited, or had trustworthy information about. It was written in Leo’s imperfect Italian – and ‘improved’ (and slightly distorted) by a Venitian editor. Since its original publication in 1550, this

book has been re-edited over 30 times, in at least 8 different languages. Leo was probably the first Muslim author to write for the printing press. Until the mid 1960s, his work was a standard reference for explorers, geographers, travelers and historians. Those of you who have read the novel have read bits and pieces straight from his *Cosmographia* – for example stories about Lions, stories about sieges and disputes in Moroccan towns, his description of Timbuktu.

Until very recently, no one had seen an original manuscript for this work, and historians assumed it had been lost with Leo. Yet, recently, a German scholar has taken up the work begun by an Italian historian in the 1930s on a manuscript dated 1526, and is slowly proving that this was Leo's original piece. Having spent a decade in archives, slowly transcribing, and translating Leo's text, he is about ready to bring it to press—which will be a considerable moment in Leo scholarship!

[SLIDE 7 back to map]

Death and Destiny: there is no strict consensus about the end of Leo's life – he seems to disappear from sources after 1527, when the German emperor Charles' mercenaries sacked Rome. There is one source suggesting that he was in Tunis in the early 1530s; but this has been questioned, as Arabic scholars have found no Arabic sources mentioning his presence in Tunis. According to them, someone with Leo's background would have been tremendously valuable to Tunisian authorities. In 1534, Tunis was sacked by the Turks. If Leo died then, he would have been 40 years old.

[SLIDE 8 picture]

This may be a portrait of Leo Africanus; at least there are several bits of evidence that point to this:

- ?? Painted by a monk who was commissioned to paint most notable people in the Leo Xth and Clement VII's entourage: del Piombo
- ?? Dates from 1519/1520; when we know that Leo was at the Vatican; he was 24/25 years old
- ?? The Beard was not in fashion among young Italian intellectuals (more common among older men)
- ?? The objects describing his activities are those of a cosmographer: globe, compass, pen, book...

!!!STOP AT PICTURE!!! GO TO WEBSITE

3. The project

[website home page]

A character whose work has been extensively used and referenced; but not very well known...

Bring his text, his world, the man to life

[leo home page] – you can click on these various links to delve into pieces of the biography I outlined above—each episode references sources, which you can more extensively explore in:

[Bibliography home page]

Nearly exhaustive list + comments

Then bulk of website is the text come to life:

[Expeditions home page]

3 expeditions to choose from: all in Morocco, 2/3 of Leo's text about Morocco – this was the reason I focused on this territory – also keeping in mind that while the 16th century Mediterranean was a rich, and vibrant time for most Mediterranean countries, Morocco did not really partake in this growth – rather it was a time of eclipse (overall 2 centuries), and Leo's text is particularly valuable because it is the only text to document this relatively obscure period in Morocco' history and to tell us something about inland Morocco.

[Caravan home page]

For example, let's take the Caravan trip

Home page shows you itinerary

According to Leo, and confirmed by historians, he traveled to Sub-Saharan Africa twice – i.e. crossing the desert 4 times. The first time he was still a teen-ager; the second he was in his late teens, early 20s. The first trip he accompanied his uncle on a diplomatic mission to Timbuktu; the second trip seems to have been less official, though his careful observation of commercial traffic and opportunities along the way suggests that he may have been preparing to report back to the Moroccan sultan about the size of Saharan trade. In both cases, he traveled with a caravan – a long gathering of merchants and animals who joined forces for the dangerous and strenuous crossing of the desert

Caravans left Morocco in late winter, so as to avoid having to cross the desert any later than late spring, when they came home. So I traveled in February

[Fes home]

This trip starts in Fes

From this page you see that throughout the trip you can follow three different narrators:

Leo's voice (ie his text) about that particular place

Historical commentary from the rest of Leo's text, or from other sources

My contemporary observations

[Fes Caravan notes]

In Fes, merchants and travelers would get equipped before their departure. In these pages, you can learn about the places merchants stayed and transacted when they were in Fes – namely hosels or fondouk. Bug gatherings of merchants; central courtyard, scales – a place of conversation, and exchange – central facet of the communal dimension of travel.

Early morning on a cool winter day, caravan departs on the way to desert

[on the way to Figuig] – modern day transport – communal buses

[Figuig home]

[Figuig Leo]

Learn about water and agricultural technology in Leo's time – and ways in which oasis communities could survive in otherwise desert landscapes.

For example, they used their guests: read text!

[click twice to Sijilmassa]

[Sijilmassa Home]

Disappointments of historical hunting: modern day Rissani sits atop ruins that were once one of Morocco's greatest towns- but no museum, no archeological dig, very little even for tourists.

[Sijilmassa Cristel]

Read about the disappointment of searching for information about the remains of the Sijilmassa

Other features include:

[About Cristel home page]

About Cristel: more or less autobiographical stories; a living diary chronicling my time in Morocco, the things I love, the things that drove me nuts. My favorite feature is “Inshallah” – the frustration I felt at having to blend into Moroccan time, which is intimately associated to Moroccan sense of destiny, ontology... If God wills –

[Ideal trip home page]

Ideal Trip: tips for the tourist

So now that I have told you a bit about Leo Africanus, and a bit about this website, I would like to talk about the main things I learned from this research and my travels in Morocco – as you may wonder whether I could have built this website without leaving the library (and with a great picture data base)?

4. What I learned

a. Brought the text to life; helped it make sense

Example 1: Penon

[Penon page] click on expedition 2, then start the trip

Look at the proximity of that rock and the coast

[Badis- leo]

Read the text on that page (scroll down to last paragraph)

b. Brought historiography to life

Example 1: interview with Hajji

[Hajji page]

Select one question and read it

Example 2: interview with Mimo

[Mimo page]

Select one question and read it

c. Brought Leo to life: because the many faces of Leo in many ways corresponded to the many faces of morocco, that I discovered as I lived there

[SLIDE 9: text on amphibie]

Told me something about the importance of the way in **which we tell our lives**