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Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds
(review)

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Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds*.

New York: Hill and Wang, 2006. x + 435 pp. + 32 b/w pls. index. illus. map. gloss. bibl. \$30. ISBN: 0-8090-9434-7.

The Library of Congress catalogs *Trickster Travels* under the subject heading “Leo, Africanus.” The North African convert has been a well-known figure in Western scholarship since the publication of his influential *La Description dell’Africa* (1550) by Ramusio, a work that saw many further editions and translations. It was widely read, as Isaac Casaubon’s heavily annotated copy of the Antwerp 1556 Latin edition testifies (British Library). It served as a rich source of geographical and historical information on interior Africa well into the nineteenth century. Yet the hero of *Trickster Travels* is in fact a much-less-familiar character: al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al Fasi. Whereas Leo Africanus is a geographical author to be quoted or refuted on African matters, al-Hasan al-Wazzan is a Mediterranean traveler, a captive, a convert, “a man with a double vision, sustaining two cultural worlds” (12). Thus, Natalie Zemon Davis offers a study of the person behind the *Description of Africa*, and uses his famous text as means to reconstruct his world. This is also the first book in English about Leo/al-Hasan al-Wazzan to appear after the discovery of a few important documents, mainly the original manuscript of the *Description*. Here Davis relies on and further develops the works of Rauchenberger and Zhiri, in German and French, respectively.

Davis narrates in detail the known course of al-Hasan al-Wazzan’s rich life. Born in Granada around its fall in 1492, al-Hasan al-Wazzan grew up and studied in Fez, where his family reestablished itself. There he was trained as a legal scholar, a *faqih*, and went on various missions in the service of the Wattasid ruler of Fez. In 1518, on the way back from Cairo, al-Hasan al-Wazzan fell captive to pirates and was brought as a valuable gift to Pope Leo X. Baptized Giovanni Leone, he spent the next decade in Italy, where, with the help of a few powerful patrons — most notably Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo — he entered learned circles and participated in several collaborative projects which required his skills in Arabic. After the Sack of Rome, al-Hasan al-Wazzan probably escaped back to North Africa and returned to Islam. Davis’s main focus, however, is thematic. She is fascinated by al-Hasan al-Wazzan’s unique and fragile position as a Muslim at the heart of Christian Europe — as symbolized by a folktale he told about a trickster bird who could swim with the fish. Extracting clues from the *Description* in manuscript and printed versions and, most impressively, from a systematic comparison of the two, Davis analyzes the make-up of her hero’s split mind. She convincingly shows that his conversion was never more than skin-deep and demonstrates how he could maintain his integrity as a Muslim while keeping his Christian patrons happy. Firmly rooting the *Description* in Islamic geographical and historiographical traditions, Davis explains how Yuhanna al-Asad — Arabic for Giovanni Leone as he occasionally titled himself — managed to speak to two audiences at once. The main image he presented to European readers, although

later interventions from editors and translators deformed it, was of a down-to-earth Africa, blessed by the civilizing influence of the Prophet's religion.

Alas, as Davis points out herself, this reconstruction is highly conjectural and relies on a meager body of evidence: the manuscript of the *Description*, some unfinished works, and a few indirect references by contemporaries. In response to these silences and lacunae, Davis employs her trademark imaginative history to perfection. She proposes a "plausible life story from materials of the time" (13), strewn with learned guesses and speculations. For example, Davis is convinced that al-Hasan al-Wazzan had a wife (and possibly children) in Fez before being captured, and she even invites us to imagine what their house may have looked like — all on the basis of indirect inferences from general practices in North African society. The style might irritate those uneasy with conditional and speculative phrases, yet it seems that in al-Hasan al-Wazzan's case there is really no other methodological choice, and Davis always lets the reader understand where the evidence is firm and where her imagination has filled in the gaps. Davis's relentless efforts to carve more and more into the rock of historical context are remarkable, although more attention should have been paid to two themes that are central to current research on the early modern Mediterranean: captivity and travel. Davis is naturally more comfortable in Europe, where she masterfully marshals languages, archives, and basic concepts. In her brave foray — almost a mirror-image of her protagonist's attempt to make sense of Christian Europe — into the twice-removed world of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century North Africa, Davis depends on translated editions of primary sources and on an extensive survey of modern scholarship. For specialists, her digressions on Islamic legal and scholarly traditions might seem too broad, often invoking authors and cases from places and periods very remote from the sixteenth-century Mediterranean. To Europeanists and general readers, however, Davis opens a window onto a rich, complex, and civilized world, thus echoing the message delivered by al-Hasan al-Wazzan in the sixteenth century. In our days, as ideas of holy war and civilization clashes gather momentum, Davis's nuanced — and plausible — portrait of a man between worlds is more than welcome.

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Paolo Giovio. *Commentario de le cose de' Turchi*.

Quaderni di Schede Umanistiche 10. Ed. Lara Michelacci. Bologna: CLUEB, 2005. 190 pp. illus. bibl. €18. ISBN: 88-491-2570-4.

Paolo Giovio wrote his *Commentario de le cose de' Turchi* for Emperor Charles V in the wake of the devastating Ottoman victory at Mohacs in 1526. The text was completed in 1530, first published at Rome in 1532, translated into Latin, German, and other vernaculars, and reprinted in numerous editions both in Italy and north of the Alps, often accompanied by other compilations of Turkish history or contemporary reportage. The text is short, lively, and readable, being written (as