

Natalie Zemon Davis.

Trickster travels : a sixteenth-century Muslim between worlds

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CHAPTER FOUR

Between Africa and Europe

 THE *Cosmography and Geography of Africa* is a book of description and commentary, in which its author consciously moves back and forth between Europe and Africa, between the different cultures and polities of Africa, and between Islam and Christianity. Yuhanna al-Asad offers us a few clues to interpret his double vision.

The first is early in the book. After an overview of the peoples and customs of Africa, he concludes with an account of the “virtues” and “vices” of the Africans, those living along the Mediterranean coast, those living in the nomadic communities of the deserts, and those living in the Land of the Blacks. This pro-and-con weighing is found in other Arabic geographies, but Yuhanna al-Asad goes on with an unusual reflection: “The author admits to not a little shame and confusion in . . . disclosing the vices and disgraceful qualities of Africa, having been nourished and raised there, and known as a man of purity. But it is necessary for anyone who wants to write to tell things as they are.”¹

He, Yuhanna al-Asad, must be “similar in his act of composition” to the executioner found in a story in *The Book of the Hundred Tales* (*nel*

libro del cento novelle). He then tells a story about taking responsibility. A man is sentenced to be whipped, and the executioner is his good friend, who, he hopes, will have compassion for him. Instead the executioner beats him especially hard and cruelly. The beaten man cries out, "Oh my friend, you are treating your friend very badly." The executioner answers, "My friend, have patience. I must do my duty as it ought to be done."²

But having done his duty, will Yuhanna al-Asad then be thought by readers to have the vices of the Africans and to lack their virtues? Anticipating such a suspicion, he tells a story that reframes the question of responsibility; it, too, he had found in the *Hundred Tales*. Once there was a bird that could live either on land or under the water. He lived in the air with the other birds until the king of the birds came demanding his taxes. Immediately the bird flew to the sea and said to the fish, "You know me. I'm always with you. That idle king of the birds has been asking me for taxes." The fish welcomed him and he stayed with them, "comforted and consoled," until the king of the fish came around asking for taxes. Whereupon the bird shot out of the water, flew back to the birds, and told them the same story. So he continued without ever paying any taxes.

The author concludes from this that whenever a man sees his advantage, he always follows it . . . I will do like the bird . . . If the Africans are being vituperated, [this writer] will use as a clear excuse that he was not born in Africa, but in Granada. And if the Granadans are being railed against, he will find the excuse that he was not brought up in Granada.³

Through the sequence of the executioner's tale and the bird story, Yuhanna al-Asad provides his readers with a key to interpret his writings: he will tell the truth about "things as they are," but in doing it, he will not pin himself down in a fixed location. Rather as author, he will be free to move strategically between different cultural positions.

The bird story not only is about ruse and invention but was created by ruse and invention. In the early sixteenth century, there was no

Arabic collection with the precise title of the *Hundred Tales*.⁴ Yuhanna al-Asad seems to have been trying to associate his stories with Arabic translations of the famous old Persian collections of Shahrazad's stories, circulating in variant forms entitled either *A Thousand Nights (Alf layla)* or *A Thousand and One Nights (Alf layla wa-layla)*. In none of these manuscripts appear tales resembling in content or tale-type either the bird story or the story of the dutiful executioner. But no matter—Europeans of Yuhanna al-Asad's day would not have known the exact title or the whole contents of the *Thousand and One Nights*, only some individual tales or motifs that, for instance, had passed from the Arabic into Latin at the hands of the remarkable Petrus Alfonsi in the early twelfth century, and then into Spanish and other European languages.⁵ Yuhanna al-Asad could evoke an Arabic origin without establishing it.

At the same time the *Hundred Tales* also evoked two Italian collections. One was the hundred stories of Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, copies of which had been pouring from Italy's presses since the 1470s. Then there was a celebrated collection of Italian tales, going back in different manuscript traditions to the thirteenth century and appearing in print in Bologna in 1525, with the title *Le Ciento Novelle Antike* (The Hundred Ancient Tales). Yuhanna al-Asad would easily have heard of this book: it was drawn from a copy prepared in 1523 for Cardinal Pietro Bembo, who was in the circle of his most important patron, Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo. But neither the *Decamerone*, filled with tricksters and ruses, nor the *Ciento Novelle Antike* (or its earlier manuscript variants) has stories or tale-types similar to those of the executioner or the amphibian bird.⁶

Thus, Yuhanna al-Asad invented a source for these self-revelatory tales that, he might hope, would evoke for his readers both an Arabic origin and a popular Italian collection of stories. Then he went on to craft his own tales.

For the story of the dutiful executioner, I have not found Yuhanna al-Asad's source. In contrast to his rigorous executioner, the Arabic and the European traditions are replete with stories of a "compassionate executioner" who for one reason or another lets off the sentenced person;

and of the sentenced person who escapes punishment by disguise, shamming, or substitution.⁷

For the bird story, Yuhanna al-Asad was recasting a traditional Arabic tale. Birds who talk, rule, advise, seek, and quarrel have a strong presence in Persian and Arabic literature. They are found in the classic *Kalila and Dimna*, tales going back to India, which were translated from Persian into Arabic in the eighth century; in *The Conference of the Birds* by the early thirteenth-century Sufi poet ‘Attar, where birds seeking their king under the leadership of a hoopoe are allegories for the spiritual quest of human souls; and in some beautiful stanzas of the *Mathnawi* by Rumi, the great thirteenth-century Sufi. Perhaps there was an amphibious bird using stratagems in a thirteenth-century book called *Subtle Ruses*, but its chapter on “the ruses of animals” has been lost.⁸ Perhaps, too, there was such a crafty bird flying about in stories current in the Maghreb of al-Wazzan’s youth.⁹

As best I can see, Yuhanna al-Asad’s source was a much-told tale recorded in the celebrated *Book of the Animals* (*Kitab al-Hayawan*) of the ninth-century Iraqi polymath al-Jahiz. There, an ostrich excuses himself from carrying a load because “I am a bird,” and from flying because “I am a camel.” Al-Jahiz commented, “People use this story in a proverbial manner for a person who always finds an excuse to evade an assignment.”¹⁰ The saying was passed down over the generations, and Rumi put it in one of his poems:

Like the ostrich: when they say “Fly!” you say:
 “I am a camel, and how could a camel fly, oh Arab of Tavy?”
 When the time of burden comes, you say: “No, I am a bird.
 How could a bird carry the burden?”¹¹

From such motifs, Yuhanna al-Asad composed his own tale of a creature who escapes obligation and blame by claiming different identities. He must then have been delighted to find in Italy a similar tale in a Latin translation of Aesop. Aesop was known in the Arabic tradition only as a name, some of his fables (though not the one we are about to

look at) being attributed to the legendary wise man Luqman.¹² But in Italy Aesop's *Fables* were available both in a printed edition dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici and in an illustrated manuscript owned by the Medici—that is, circulating in the network in which Yuhanna al-Asad sometimes served in the 1520s. In Aesop the tricking figure is a bat, which escapes being eaten by a weasel who hates birds by saying he is not a bird but a flying mouse; not long after, the bat escapes another weasel who hates mice, saying he is not a mouse but a bird.¹³

Through his bird story, Yuhanna al-Asad was linking himself to a wide Arabo-Islamic cluster of ideas and narratives about *hila*, that is, ruse, artifice, stratagem, “ingenious means to get oneself out of a difficult situation.” Such practices were multivalent, approved in some circumstances and decried in others. *Subtle Ruses* tells of the stratagems of angels, the devil, prophets, sultans, and judges. The beloved trickster figures of the Maghreb—the clever fool Djiha and the old woman La‘aba—use everything from good-natured guile to “satanic stratagems” to get what they want or unmask some abuse or falsity around them.¹⁴

The Qur'an itself used *hila*-like terms—*makra* (ruse, artifice, trick), *khada'a* (to deceive, dupe), *kaid* (ruse, stratagem)—to refer to both the actions of unbelievers and the actions of God: “And they devised, and God / devised, and God is / the best of devisers” (3:54); “The hypocrites seek to trick God, but God / is tricking them” (4:142); “They are devising guile, / and I am devising guile” (86:15–16).¹⁵ Yuhanna al-Asad had been considering such phrases when he worked over Egidio's Latin Qur'an not long before he wrote down his bird story. The Latin verb that was settled on there to translate the Arabic “devising” and “tricking” was *decipere*, “to deceive, snare, beguile.” When Joannes Gabriel, the initial translator, used it for these verses, Yuhanna al-Asad let the translations stand; when he turned to a milder verb, like “to arrange,” Yuhanna al-Asad corrected it to “*decipere*.”¹⁶

In Italy, Yuhanna al-Asad had also met a cluster of ideas and tales associated with disguise, ruse, stratagem, and tricks, sometimes re-proved, often applauded. Apart from Aesop and Boccaccio, he might

have noticed, as he was copying the Arab translation of Saint Paul's Epistles for Alberto Pio, how that apostle referred to "guile" and craft when he wrote to the Corinthians. On the one hand (2 Cor. 11:3), Paul did not want them to be "corrupted" by bad preachers "as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty": Yuhanna wrote "*makr*" for "subtilty." On the other hand (12:16), Paul claimed to have won over the Corinthians to his own view by "being crafty"—"I caught you with guile." Paul's "being crafty" was "*makir*," too, as Yuhannah al-Asad wrote it, and "with guile" was "*bi-l-hila*."¹⁷

Perhaps, too, Yuhanna al-Asad got a whiff of how deception was being written about in Rome in the early 1520s and by people connected to Leo X and Clement VII. Baldassare Castiglione was just then asking in his *Cortegiano* whether "a certain circumspect dissimulation" was not needed for the perfect courtier. Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini were reflecting on the role of disguise, guile, and openness in political life: Machiavelli had advised the prince that depending on "the variations of fortune," he might have to break faith and go against the dictates of religion, while always seeming openly to follow them; Guicciardini was noting that deception was useful only "in rare and important cases," but that a citizen should use "as much diligence to hide [his] secret thoughts [from a tyrant] as [the tyrant] uses to discover them."¹⁸

Thus, the invented source of Yuhanna al-Asad's introductory stories—the *Hundred Tales*—and the ruse of his ingenious bird had resonance on both sides of the Mediterranean. With them, he was building a bridge for himself, one that he could cross in either direction. With the stories of the executioner and the amphibian, he was also advising his Italian readers that the condition for his truth-telling was that he be not too tightly classified.

Yuhanna al-Asad's second clue to his double vision comes in the midst of a long and often critical account of North African diviners and magicians and various Muslim sects. Certain men, he tells us, practice a rule called *za'iraja*, which means "cabala," a cabala residing not in writings but in nature, by which the diviners find out the secrets and future

events they are asked about. The rule is very difficult, and in order not to be baffled by it, one must become a most perfect arithmetician and astrologer.

He himself had read commentaries on the rule by Jamal ad-din al-Marjani and by Ibn Khaldun. Especially he had seen za'irajat performed: one by three masters at Fez, at the Bu 'Inaniya mosque (figure 16), and another at Tunis, conducted by "a most excellent master," descendant of the famous al-Marjani himself. At Fez, concentric circles and diameters were drawn on the marble floor, and at specified places were recorded the points of the compass, the planets, the signs of the zodiac, the phases of the moon, the days and months of the year, the letters of the Arabic alphabet, Arabic numerals, and other such information. A question was asked. By a long and elaborate procedure—at Fez it lasted a whole summer's day—letters from the words in the question were separated, recombined, and replaced by specified numbers, which were matched up with certain sites on the za'iraja design. After extensive calculations, connected with the angle of the ecliptic at the moment, they were turned into letters again. The answer finally came in the distinctive Arabic metric form, al-tawil, which Yuhanna al-Asad had described in his poetry book. "And in the verse, generated in such a way, is found the true response to the question asked . . . And the divination never fails. A wondrous thing! The writer says he has never seen the like in nature."¹⁹

Suddenly, after expressing so much admiration for za'iraja, Yuhanna al-Asad switches his tone and backs away from it:

The author has to say it is out of laziness that he has refused to learn the said rule since he had the time and a master willing to teach him free of charge. But even more he refused because according to Muslim theologians, such a rule and science are forbidden as dishonest and almost a heresy. Their scripture says any divination of texts is vain. No one knows the future and its secrets but God alone. Sometimes their inquisitors imprison and persecute those who get mixed up with such a science.²⁰

Surely Yuhanna al-Asad knew he had a good topic when he broached za'iraja. Would not Egidio da Viterbo, master of the Hebrew Cabala, and other scholars like him be interested to hear of this hermetic procedure of learned Muslims? It was one of the most complex of the Arabic occult sciences and had inspired treatises for five hundred years, including many pages in Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima*. Ibn Khaldun claimed to know the "secret" of the surprising poetic outcome of za'iraja: from the beginning, a verse in al-tawil meter was the model. Moreover, Ibn Khaldun went on, nothing supernatural was discovered from it: "things of the future belong to the supernatural," knowledge of which belonged to God alone. Yet Ibn Khaldun still said za'iraja was "a remarkable operation and a wondrous procedure" for finding a relation between sets of words, between question and answer. Al-Marjani recalled that when he had first taught the procedure to Ibn Khaldun, and the answer to his question—"is za'iraja an ancient or a recent science?"—came through, Ibn Khaldun had danced and twirled with delight.²¹

Yuhanna al-Asad's za'iraja story crosses the Mediterranean well and communicates something important about its author. In the bird story, Yuhanna al-Asad moves freely and strategically between different cultural polities, using ruse when needed. In the za'iraja story, he is deeply curious about difficult and surprising cultural operations; he wants to observe them and try them out, but then retires from their danger. These tales can guide us as we see how Yuhanna al-Asad—former diplomat and traveler in Dar al-Islam—describes his movement between Europe and Africa, between Christianity and Islam, and through the different regions of Africa itself.



ON NONTHEOLOGICAL MATTERS, Yuhanna al-Asad flew back and forth between Europe and North Africa with ease. Sometimes he assigned equal quality to each, finding similarities in beauty and splendor and in dirt and disorder. "Most of the Arabs [of the deserts] of Numidia are poets," he said, "ever composing lengthy songs about their battles and hunts and also about matters of love with great elegance

and sweetness. Their verses are rhymed in the manner of the vernacular verses of Europe.”²²

Closer to the Mediterranean were the poems about one Hellul, a celebrated warrior from the mountainous region just north of the Rif, which had often sent its men across the Strait of Gibraltar to fight for the Granadans against the Spanish. “Hellul,” says Yuhanna al-Asad, fought and died in the battle led by the Almohad caliph al-Nasir against the Spanish at the Fort of the Eagle (al-Uqab) in al-Andalus in 609/1212, where the Moors lost sixty thousand men. For the Christians, it was the start of the victories that culminated in the seizure of Granada by King Ferdinand 285 years later. Despite this disaster, insists Yuhanna al-Asad, Hellul had a permanent legacy: “in Africa and in Baetica [the old Roman name for southeastern Spain], the people have stories of his battles written in prose and verse, just as the deeds of Roland are found in the Latin vernacular.”²³

Despite a dramatic shift in the Christian/Muslim balance of power, a shift that ultimately had so influenced his life, Yuhanna al-Asad was insisting on a symmetry in European and North African poetry and popular memory. Some invention seems to have gone into the symmetry. Who was this Hellul? Hellul is Yuhanna al-Asad’s transcription for the Arabic name Hilal. In his extensive history of the Berbers and Arabs of the Maghreb, Ibn Khaldun tells of Shaykh Hilal ibn Hamidan, who came from a region “distinguished by the bravery of its warriors,” but his territory was located far from the Rif, and Hilal ibn Hamidan was very much alive in the years after the disaster at the Fort of the Eagle, leading his tribesmen in revolt against the caliph’s brother. Other historians closer to that battle say nothing of a heroic warrior named Hilal and attribute the catastrophe to the bitterness of unpaid troops and the evil conduct and advice of the caliph’s vizier.²⁴

“Hilal” is, however, the name given to an epic cycle of poems associated with the invasion-migration into the Maghreb by the nomadic Arab tribe of Banu Hilal in the eleventh century: *Sirat Bani Hilal*, The Song of the Banu Hilal. Ibn Khaldun included some of the verses in his *Muqaddima*, and the poems have been recited over the centuries in the

Maghreb. ("That's Hilalian!" the reciters will exclaim today as they tell of an action showing sure intelligence.)²⁵ Yuhanna al-Asad seems to have taken a name with epic resonance in North Africa and invented a culture hero in the war of Granada against Spain.²⁶

And what of the Christian Roland, slain at Roncesvalles in 161/778 and transformed through legend and poetry into the hero of a world-shaking battle between his uncle Charlemagne and the Saracens? "Charlemagne" was a name that Yuhanna al-Asad would have encountered early on in al-Mas'udi's geography-history, a book he referred to in his *Geography*, but he would not have seen "Roland" until he got to Italy. There, amid calls for a new crusade against the Turks, Lodovico Ariosto's acclaimed *Orlando Furioso* had had its first two editions in 1516 and 1521, and though Ariosto's love-mad Orlando differs from the warrior Roland of the medieval romance, heroic action against the Saracens is central to the poem. Yuhanna al-Asad could have heard about this book and the stories behind Orlando from several people he met in Italy—including Alberto Pio and Jacob Mantino—but perhaps most easily from Elijah Levita, author, we recall, of his own epic poem in Yiddish of a medieval romance.²⁷ Out of such conversations, Yuhanna al-Asad could conceive the dual symmetry of "Hilal" and Roland.

Pairing occurs in other connections. The hotels in Fez, Yuhanna al-Asad reports, were very large, especially those in the vicinity of the al-Qarawiyyin mosque, with fountains and sewage systems sufficient for 120 rooms and more. "The like does not exist in Italy except at the College of the Spaniards in Bologna and the Palace of St. George in Rome." (Indeed, Rome's water problem was severe for its growing population in the 1520s; it did not become a city of fountains until after papal action in 1561 and later.)²⁸ Yuhanna al-Asad had to admit that some of the Fez hostelries were the haunts of men involved in sexual mischief:

They go about dressed as women and adorn their persons like women, they shave their beards and talk like women, and they spin. Each of these accursed hotel-dwellers takes another man as a husband, and it is

said they also use each other in the fashion of the women prostitutes in the brothels of Europe.

Sexual disorder took place on both sides of the Mediterranean.²⁹

Even in narrating warfare between the Portuguese Christians and the Muslims of the Maghreb, some of it witnessed with his own eyes, Yuhanna al-Asad is relatively balanced. A boastful note does slip into his account of his fellow Granadan refugee the valiant 'Ali al-Manzari. Celebrated for his military prowess against the Spanish just before the reconquest of Granada, al-Manzari rebuilt the fortress and town of Tatouan, previously destroyed by the Portuguese, and used it as a base of operation against them around Ceuta and Tangier:

With about 300 horsemen from Granada, highly skilled in arms and practiced in war, he scoured the countryside, taking many Christians captive. He put the Christians to work on the fortifications and treated them badly. This writer saw there more than 3000 Christian slaves, all dressed in wool sacks and sleeping in chains in the ditches. But [al-Manzari] was extremely generous to any stranger who passed through his lands.³⁰

Describing the battle between the Portuguese and the troops of the sultan of Fez at al-Ma'mura, however, Yuhanna al-Asad expresses virtually no partisanship, though he must have been cheering for the Muslims at the time he fought there in 921/1515. He analyzes the military situation with the candor of Machiavelli, who was writing *The Art of War* and his *History of Florence* during Yuhanna al-Asad's years in Italy, a candor found as well in some of the best Islamic military historiography. The Portuguese lost because they were sorely outnumbered, comments Yuhanna al-Asad; this was a hard fact they should have taken more seriously. They also tried to join with Castilian troops, leading inevitably to disagreement about tactics. Here in victory, the Muslims were cruel ("the Moors are brutal people") and killed the Portuguese or

let them drown rather than taking them prisoner. When the Christians won, they showed little mercy as well, enslaving, for instance, much of the population of Asila after its initial capture in the late fifteenth century.³¹

In other evaluations of North Africa and Italy, one region might come out better than the other, but the approval did not always go in the same direction. On the one hand, Yuhanna al-Asad expresses strong reservations about the table manners in the land where he grew up. Having contrasted the simple couscous meals of the people with the sumptuous repasts of the wealthy, he remarks:

But in comparison with the nobles of Europe, the life of Africa seems vile and miserable, not because of the small quantity of food, but because of the disorderly customs. In eating, everyone sits around a low table without table linen. No one has a napkin in hand. When they have couscous or some other food, they take it together out of one pot, eating with their hands without a spoon. Soup and meat are all in one pot, and each person takes a piece of meat and, without a knife, breaks it apart with hand and teeth. They all eat at a furious pace, and have nothing to drink until their hunger is sated. Then everyone drinks a cup or bottle of water. Such is the common practice, though men of learning and quality live more politely. In short, a simple Italian gentleman lives with more refinement than any great chief or notable in Africa.³²

Yuhanna al-Asad was describing a society that had codes about eating and drinking, both local codes and those drawn from Malikite law and ritual. Eat and drink with the right hand only, went the legal teaching. Reach for food only from the nearest part of the platter, and do not breathe on the food while doing so. Chew your food thoroughly before swallowing it. Drink in moderate sips, moving the cup away from your lips in between sips so as not to breathe on the beverage, then pass the cup to the person on your right. Do not lean on your elbow while eating. Do not enter a mosque right after eating leek, garlic, or raw onion.

Beyond these rules, there was also a literature of manners for dining together going back to al-Jahiz's mockery of gluttony and selfishness around the common pot.³³

Even before he was kidnapped, Yuhanna al-Asad seems to have believed that these codes were not being lived up to, and that the local rules did not go far enough: his talk of the greater delicacy of North African men of letters and quality suggests as much. But his years in Italy strengthened his distaste for the Maghrebian common pot. European elites were themselves just moving away from the habits of the common pot, with the Italians especially insistent on the fork as an implement that made dining a "politer" affair. Erasmus's *On Good Manners for Boys* appeared only in 1530, but its precepts—"it is boorish to plunge your hands into sauced dishes, you should take what you want with a knife and fork"; "it is impolite to lick greasy fingers, you should wipe them with a napkin"—were already being uttered in great Italian households in earlier years. Yuhanna al-Asad had adopted the standards that he had observed at the tables of prince and cardinal.³⁴

On the other hand, his account of the hospitality extended by Muslim notables, even in remote mountain settlements, suggests that in this virtue, so highly valued in Arabic lands, they surpassed Europeans. An example was the chief of a Berber community in the High Atlas, a man "of great liberality" (*grandissimo liberale*). It was to his court that the sixteen-year-old al-Hasan ibn Muhammad had repaired years before, bearing a poem and gifts from his ambassador uncle and a panegyric of his own. The meal offered the young envoy he could still remember with pleasure: the many kinds of roasted meat wrapped in a pasta resembling firm lasagne, the couscous, and other foods. Gratified by the poetry in his praise, the chief had bestowed on al-Hasan ibn Muhammad—we recall the gifts once again—eight hundred ducats, a horse, and three slaves for his uncle; fifty ducats and a horse for himself; ten ducats for each of his companions; and a promise of more. "This story is meant to show readers of the present work that in Africa there are such nobles as the chief of this mountain."³⁵

Yuhanna al-Asad also describes city life in Fez, Tunis, and Cairo as dazzling: their endless markets, where (as he says of Cairo) one can find anything from rose water and cooked meat to gorgeous textiles, spices, jewels, and golden objects of great cost (*grande ricchezza*); their skilled artisans; their mosques and madrasas; their baths; their street fairs and entertainments; their beautiful women and well-dressed men; their learned scholars; their courts. In Fez "the fifty great mosques are well constructed and decorated with colored marble and other ornaments, each one with a beautiful fountain, made of the most beautiful marble and other stones unknown in Italy"; the gorgeous gardens of Fez, with their fountains, pavilions, and fragrant flowers and fruit trees, are like "a terrestrial paradise" (*paradiso terrestre*: his image evokes both biblical Eden and the Qur'anic al-Janna, or garden). Never had he seen a market, "neither in Africa, nor Asia nor Italy," with so many people and things as the one on the outskirts of Fez. As for Cairo—"Cairo's fame flies everywhere, a very great and wondrous city" (*una cipta grandissima et mirabile*).³⁶ These towns more than matched anything he had seen in Italy.



THERE WAS ONE European wonder that Yuhanna al-Asad did not mention: the printing press. He must have heard its fruits extolled by Alberto Pio, patron of the great humanist publisher Aldo Manuzio in Venice and founder of a press in his own estates at Carpi. Surely Pope Leo X had put into the hands of his namesake Giovanni Leone some of the printed works dedicated to him: for instance, that 1516 Psalter in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic; or the 1519 Latin translation of the *Theology or Mystical Philosophy according to the Egyptians*, found by its editor in an Arabic manuscript in Damascus and attributed (fancifully) to Aristotle.

Yuhanna al-Asad must also have visited printing shops: in Rome, taken, say, by Elijah Levita to see the Hebrew press of his printer not far from Egidio da Viterbo's dwelling; in Bologna, invited by Jacob Mantino to watch the reprinting of one of his translations of Averroës.

He might even have been consulted by persons hoping to develop printing in Arabic.³⁷

Yet the *Book of the Cosmography and Geography of Africa* makes no mention of printing as an alternative to the scribal copying and highly wrought calligraphy so important to the Islamic world its author describes. Presumably Yuhanna al-Asad shared the religious concerns, both philosophical and visual, of other Muslim scholars and authorities that made printing in Arabic an unwelcome art in Dar al-Islam. A fault in a text loomed much larger here than in the Christian or Jewish tradition. The account of how the Qur'an had been received by the Prophet from Allah and ultimately recorded, the weight assigned to a trustworthy chain of sources for reports of the sayings and acts of the Prophet (hadith)—these traditions encouraged strong loyalty to and controversy about the authenticity and accuracy of a text. Stories bounced down the centuries about scholars who burned or poured water over their manuscripts, even manuscripts on nonreligious subjects, lest they be copied with mistakes and mislead future readers. Most scholars had their manuscripts copied, of course, but the author or someone else was supposed to read and approve each copy for accuracy before publication.

When block printing emerged centuries earlier in Muslim lands, it was never used for anything except popular amulets, talismans, and pilgrimage certificates. When printing with movable type appeared, it was rejected for Arabic: Sultan Selim confirmed its prohibition in the Ottoman empire in 921/1515, not long before al-Hasan al-Wazzan's embassy to his court, and presumably there was similar opposition in the Maghreb. The 'ulama', the religious scholars, and the myriad copyists spread through Islamic lands approved. The Jews living in Dar al-Islam were permitted to print: refugees from Spain had already set up presses in Istanbul by the opening of the sixteenth century; and in 922-28/1516-21, one Samuel and his son Isaac were printing Talmudic tractates in Fez with type brought from Lisbon. But Jews were forbidden to print in Arabic or Turkish. What was the fear? That the damage done by the spread of a faulty printed edition of a religious text would be much greater than that by a single text made by an aberrant scribe. Indeed, when a Venetian printing house brought out an Arabic Qur'an around

1537, with the dubious hope of exporting copies to the Ottoman lands, it was so riddled with errors that almost all the copies were destroyed (figure 30).³⁸

Yuhanna al-Asad certainly could have heard about printing errors from Elijah Levita, who fumed about the “numerous faults” in the Istanbul edition of his Hebrew grammar book—“and no one to correct a single error.” Further, he would have asked himself whether the beauty and intricacy of Arabic calligraphy—styles seeking to give visual expression to the sacred text of the Qur’an (figure 29)—could ever be reproduced on the printed page. The Jews insisted that the scrolls of the Torah must always be handwritten, but in printing other books, the printer could be thought “the performer of a holy work.” As Elijah Levita pointed out, Jews used the same Hebrew word, *daphos*, for God stamping out man in his own image and the printer stamping out a book. The Muslims assigned that holy task only to the wielder of the pen.³⁹

The crucial distinction for the author of the *Geography*, as we shall see, was between communities that had letters and those that had none. Books counted wherever he had come upon them. In a mountain region of the Middle Atlas, the inhabitants wrote “a beautiful script,” transcribing many books, which were then sold in the bookshops at Fez. And how welcome a sight were the many manuscripts from the Maghreb being sold in the market at Timbuktu.⁴⁰

Yuhanna al-Asad esteemed the long-established book culture of North Africa and simply stayed away from the sensitive topic of the printing press. But he surely would have asked himself whether one day the manuscripts he was going to leave behind in Italy might be printed. In that case, as he was composing the *Geography*, the Europeans whom he imagined among his readers would be unknown and anonymous, more numerous than the coterie of scholars and patrons whom he had met. And would printing increase the chances that his book might come before the eyes of Muslims? His strategies of flying back and forth would be challenged by these Mediterranean uncertainties.