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A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds

Natalie Zemon Davis



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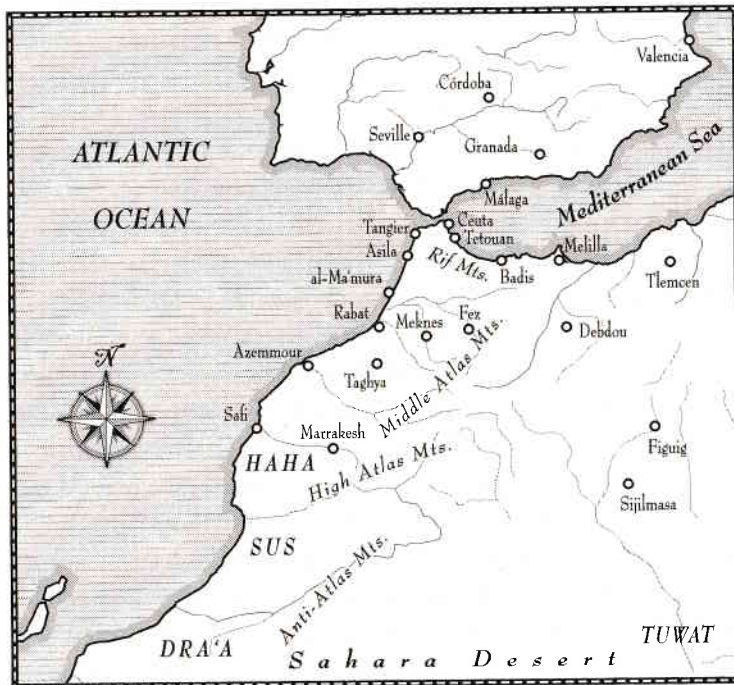
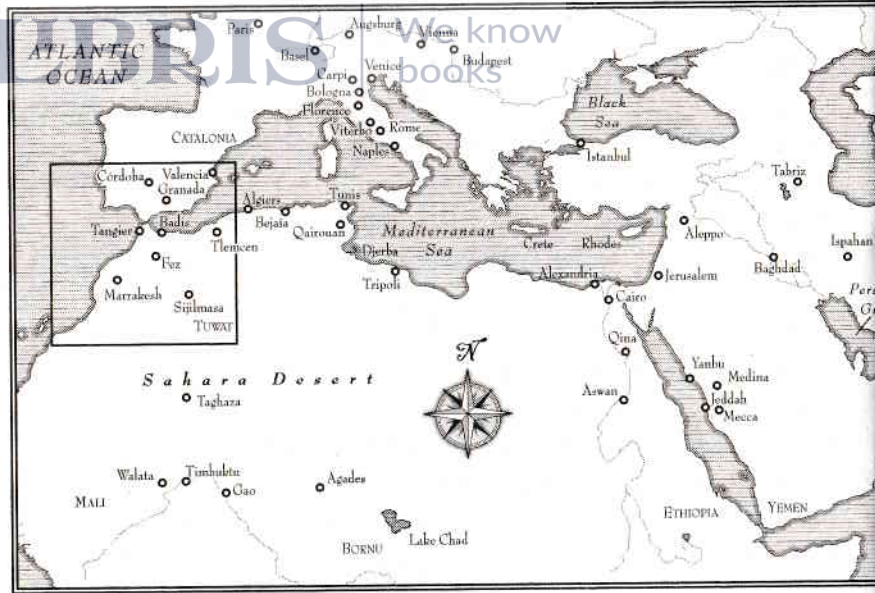
Trickster Travels

CHAPTER ONE

Living in the Land of Islam

 SITTING IN A ROMAN PRISON in 925/1519, a Muslim captive decided to write his three-part name in Arabic on a manuscript he had borrowed from the Vatican Library: al-Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Wazzan (figure 1). So we learn that his father was Muhammad and his grandfather Ahmad al-Wazzan. “Al-Fasi,” he continued, showing his origins in the Arabic fashion, “from Fez,” though elsewhere he inserted “al-Gharnati” to make clear he had been born in Granada and then brought up in Fez.¹

Would that al-Hasan al-Wazzan had been as forthcoming about his date of birth. He gave only hints in his great manuscript on Africa, where he wrote that he had first visited the Moroccan town of Safi on the Atlantic coast “as a youth, twelve years old,” and then again “about fourteen years later” (or has the scribe written “about four years later”?). Giovanni Battista Ramusio, who prepared the first printed edition of al-Wazzan’s book, read the crucial number, either from context or from another copy of the manuscript, as “fourteen.” On the second trip, al-Wazzan had carried an official message from two sultans to an important Berber from Safi, himself an officer of the king of Portugal.²



Al-Wazzan described the Berber's military actions and his tribute-collecting, which took place, according to the Portuguese authorities watching the Berber's every move, within the years 918–21/1512–14, most likely in the early summer of 918/1512.³ This puts our hero's birth to the wife of Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Wazzan in Granada about 891–93/1486–88, which fits well with other stories he told about himself.⁴

Al-Hasan ibn Muhammad had just a few years to take in the sights and sounds of Granada. The region of Granada fell within the ancient Roman province of Baetica, but the town itself—Gharnata in Arabic—became significant only after the Arab and Berber Muslims had crossed the Strait of Gibraltar to conquer Christian Spain in the early seventh century. In the eleventh century, Granada was the center of a little Berber principality; in the thirteenth century, as the Christians began to advance in the reconquest of Spain and overall political authority founded in Islamic al-Andalus, Granada became the capital of a kingdom under the Nasrid sultans, a last vigorous expression of Muslim culture on the Iberian peninsula. Two decades before al-Wazzan's birth, an Egyptian visitor had found "Granada, with its Alhambra, among the greatest and most beautiful cities of Islam," with splendid buildings and gardens, and a galaxy of illustrious poets, scholars, jurists, and artists. He bemoaned the infidels lurking nearby, who had seized so much of al-Andalus.⁵

When al-Hasan ibn Muhammad was born, Granada was a city of about fifty thousand people—mostly Muslims, but also Jews and Christians—its winding streets increasingly thronged with Muslim refugees who had fled Málaga and other Granadan towns when they were reconquered by the Christian Castilian forces in the 1480s. His family seems to have been well established, not so elevated as the entourage of Boabdil, the Nasrid sultan of Granada, but nonetheless with some property and standing. They would have lived in one of the busy quarters on either side of the Darro River, packed with the shops of artisans and traders and interspersed with mosques, including the beautiful

Great Mosque, and shrines. From there they could look up the rocky hill to the imposing buildings of the Alhambra, with its palaces, fort, mosque, fine shops, and gardens, where the sultan and his family and high officials lived in splendor.

Al-Wazzan—that is, the weigher—seems to have part of the surname of both al-Hasan's father and grandfather. They may well have been aides to the *muhtasib*, the important magistrate who supervised everything from morals to markets in Granadan towns; if so, they would have stood at his side at the Al-Caicería market, ascertaining the weight of bread and other necessities.⁶

As a little boy, al-Hasan learned his mother tongue of Arabic, and his father may have started him off already on some Spanish. Colloquial Arabic of the Granadan streets and countryside was peppered with words and phonemes of Spanish origin, reflecting interchange between Arabic and Spanish. Notables, the learned, and people of high station also spoke and read classical Arabic and often knew enough Spanish to deal with Christian traders, captives, and political agents, writing that Romance tongue in Arabic characters.⁷ Meanwhile al-Hasan would have overheard whiffs of conversation among his parents and relatives: about the advancing Castilian armies and Granadan resistance, about the violent struggle going on at the same time between the sultan Boabdil and his relatives, about conversions to Christianity of a few prominent Muslims, and about the increasing number of Granadans leaving for North Africa.

Perhaps Muhammad ibn Ahmad packed up his family for departure even before the capitulation of Granada; or perhaps he stayed through the terrible early winter of 897/late 1491, when hungry beggars filled the city streets, and through January 1492, when victorious Castilians replaced the crescent on the Alhambra with a cross and instituted ceremonies of Christian purification in the mosque of al-Ta'ibin. Whatever the date, Muhammad ibn Ahmad wanted to raise his family in a land where governance was firmly in Muslim hands. As it turned out, the freedom of religious practice promised to Granada Muslims by the

Christian monarchs was already in serious jeopardy within a few years. The family property was sold, and the al-Wazzans joined the flow of émigrés from Granada, many of them headed toward Fez.⁸

Al-Hasan al-Wazzan took with him some images—glazed tiles, which he recalled when he saw the like later in a mosque school in Marrakesh; the distinctive knee-length white veil that his mother would have wrapped herself in when she walked with him in the streets and that she probably continued to wear in Fez (figure 15)—and some memories. The account of his circumcision and the feast and dancing that went with it, he must have heard from his parents, for it was the usual custom in Granada and the Maghreb to perform it on the seventh day after the boy's birth.⁹ The rest—the past of Muslim al-Andalus, its celebrated men and women, its poets and religious scholars, its mosques and monuments—he learned about from stories, readings, and reminiscences in another land.

Some of the Andalusian émigrés complained bitterly about their new situation: they could find no way to make a living in Morocco and wished they were back in Granada. So vociferous were they that the learned Fez jurist Ahmad al-Wansharisi rebuked them for their weakness of faith. Other émigrés thrived. The religious scholars—the *ʿulamaʾ*—of Granada had long had close connection with those of Fez, and distinguished émigrés in Fez became preachers not only at the mosque of the Andalusians, but also at the city's great mosque of al-Qarawiyyin.¹⁰

Al-Hasan ibn Muhammad's family was among those that did well. His uncle, presumably part of an earlier emigration, served as diplomat for Sultan Muhammad al-Shaykh, founder of the new Wattasid dynasty at Fez that had ended two centuries of Marinid rule. This highly placed relative must have eased the transition of the al-Wazzans to their new life. Perhaps Muhammad al-Wazzan became an aide to the officer of weights and measures at Fez; perhaps he went into the sale of European woolen cloth or silk, trades dominated in Fez by the Granadan refugees. Al-Hasan's father was able to purchase vineyards up north in the Rif

Mountains and rent a castle and property in a mountain above Fez, but the family's base remained in the city.¹¹

With a population of about one hundred thousand inside its walls, Fez was twice the size of Granada, its streets frequented by Arabs, Berbers, Andalusians, Jews, Turks, and slaves of European and sub-Saharan origin. Stretching out on either side of the Fez River, the city welcomed to its markets traders from a large surrounding region, bringing textiles, metals, and foodstuffs. The call to prayer issued from hundreds of mosques throughout Fez, the centuries-old mosque of al-Qarawiyyin on the west side of the river being the most celebrated. To its lectures and library flocked students and scholars from towns and villages throughout the Maghreb. To the west of the old city was New Fez, created as a center of government two centuries earlier, with palaces, stables, and bazaars. The al-Wazzan family presumably settled on the streets rising above the east bank of the river, in the Andalusian quarter, where emigrants and refugees from across the Strait of Gibraltar had been installing themselves for centuries. There the youth al-Hasan grew up all eyes and ears for the hills, buildings, gardens, and intense life of Fez.¹²

His studies began at one of the many neighborhood schools, where boys were taught to recite the Qur'an from start to finish and read and write. Al-Hasan ibn Muhammad later recalled the banquet that fathers put on in Fez when their sons had learned the entire holy book by heart: the lad and his fellow pupils arrived on splendid horses, singing hymns to the glory of God and the Prophet.¹³

Then he went on to more advanced studies at a Fez *madrasa*, a mosque school. Al-Wazzan seems to have attended lectures and discussions at al-Qarawiyyin mosque and at the elaborate Bu 'Inaniya madrasa nearby (figure 16). Grammar, rhetoric, religious doctrine, and *fiqh* (Sunni law and jurisprudence) were the heart of his curriculum, the last interpreted by the Malikite school of law, which prevailed in the Maghreb.¹⁴

Two major scholars were enthralling their listeners during al-Wazzan's student years: the polymath Ibn Ghazi and the jurist Ahmad

al-Wansharisi. The latter was then completing his multivolumed compilation of the decisions of all the jurists of al-Andalus and the Maghreb. The former was writing and lecturing on topics ranging from the Qur'an, hadith (traditions relating to the saying and deeds of the Prophet), and *fiqh* to history, biography, and poetic meters. From his teachers, al-Wazzan would have been introduced to major concerns of Islamic scholars in the Maghreb of his day, questions that would be of import in the twists and turns of his later life. What attitude should one take toward sects within Islam, toward Jews, toward renegades? What was one to think of the innovations—the *bid'a*—that could not be justified by the Qur'an and the Law? The celebrated Moroccan Sufi Zarruq (d. 899/1493) had condemned as *bid'a* both ascetic excess and ecstatic utterance, on the one hand, and obsessive insistence on prayer rugs and decorated rosaries, on the other; none of this had to do with *shari'a* (religious law) or Sunna, that is, the example of the Prophet. But were there innovations that could be accepted? What about laxities in regard to the law such as the wine-drinking in the Rif Mountains and the unseemly relation of men and women in dancing and other matters? Some of these excesses were going on in the expanding Sufi lodges and instruction centers.

Especially, how was one to define the responsibility of *jihad*, holy war, at a time when the Portuguese were seizing Islamic coastal towns along the Mediterranean and the Atlantic? Al-Wazzan would have heard Ibn Ghazi lecture on this, and then years later seen him, septuagenarian though he was, in the entourage of the sultan of Fez in 919/1513, when the Muslims were trying in vain to retake the Atlantic town of Asila, south of Tangier, from the Christians.¹⁵

His student years brought other experiences to al-Hasan ibn Muhammad. No longer could a student count on full financial support from his madrasa for seven years as had been the case in the past. Pious donors had set up foundations (*ahbas*, *awqaf*) to subsidize education, but these gift-properties had been ravaged by the wars among the Marinid and Wattasid rivals for supremacy in Morocco in the late fifteenth century and were now being nibbled away by the Wattasid sultan

hungry for funds. Al-Wazzan supplemented his scholarship money by working for two years as a notary at the Fez hospital for sick travelers and the insane. This was a responsible post, to which he would have been named by a judge (*qadi*) and which required him to assess the reliability of witnesses who came before him. Years later al-Wazzan could remember the crazy inmates in chains, beaten when they were rowdy, harrassing visitors and complaining of their lot.¹⁶

But al-Wazzan still had time for student friendships, as with the brother of a holy man from Marrakesh with whom he had listened to lectures on the Muslim creed.¹⁷ And there was also time for poetry, a form of expression dear to scholars learned in the law, holy men, young men in love, merchants, warriors, and desert nomads alike. Al-Wazzan had learned poetic forms at the madrasa—important religious teachings might well be in verse—and would also have had his uncle, a skilled poet, as a model. Recitations were often held in public, a high point of the year in Fez being the poetry contest on the Mawlid an-Nabi, the Prophet's birthday. All the local poets met in the courtyard of the head *qadi* and from his chair recited a poem of their own composition in praise of the Messenger. He who was judged the best became Prince of Poets for the year ahead. Al-Wazzan did not say whether he ever won.¹⁸



AL-HASAN IBN MUHAMMAD STARTED traveling young. Beyond the periodic trips north to the family vineyards in the Rif Mountains and summer stays in the family's rented castle above Fez, his father took him as a boy on the annual post-Ramadan procession from Fez to a saint's tomb in the Middle Atlas, the mountain range south of the city that housed many a holy shrine. At the age of twelve, in the train of his father or his uncle, he visited Safi on the Atlantic coast, a port town buzzing with trade among regional merchants—Muslims and Jews alike—and those from Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Apart from the grains and cereals waiting to go off to Iberia, he would see the leather goods dyed in Safi shops and the bales of cloth, woven by Safi women, with the colored stripes on them prized by sub-Saharan women. Here he got his

first dose of rivalry between Muslim factions under the scheming eyes and agents of the Portuguese.¹⁹

Al-Wazzan also claimed to have traveled much farther “at the beginning of his youth”—to Persia, Babylonia, Armenia, and the central Asian lands of the Tatars. Perhaps he went with his uncle on such a distant voyage to all these places, but if so, there is little sign of it in his existing writing. Could he have wanted to exaggerate his youthful adventures so as to compete, for instance, with the range of travel of the celebrated geographer-historian al-Mas‘udi centuries before?²⁰

More circumstantial is his picture of himself scouring cemeteries in the kingdom of Fez for verse inscriptions on the tombs of sultans and other dignitaries, and then in 910/1504, when he was about sixteen, presenting his collection to Mulay al-Nasir, brother of the new Wattasid sultan Muhammad al-Burtughali. The old sultan, their father Muhammad al-Shaykh, had just died, and al-Wazzan thought the epitaphs would be consoling.²¹ Such a gift would, of course, call him to the attention of the dynasty.

About the same time, al-Wazzan's political connections and diplomatic training were much advanced as he accompanied his uncle on an embassy for Muhammad al-Burtughali to the great ruler of Timbuktu and Gao on behalf of the new sultan of Fez. Muhammad al-Burtughali presumably wanted to assess the commercial, political, and religious situation in the important Songhay empire below the Sahara Desert. As they passed south through the High Atlas, a local chieftain, learning of the ambassador's eloquence, invited him to visit. Pressed for time, the uncle sent his nephew and two companions, bearing gifts and a newly composed poem in honor of the chieftain. Al-Wazzan presented everything with grace, read a poem he had written himself, and maneuvered successfully between his own Arabic and the Atlas Berber of his host. What admiration he received, for “[he] was then only sixteen years old.” Laden with return gifts, he rejoined his uncle for the arduous and exciting trip on camel across the desert. Now he could see a procession of ostriches, going single file and looking from a distance like men riding horses on their way to attack them. Now he would have to heed his

uncle's warnings to look out for poisonous desert snakes. Now he could be thankful for the wells, lined with camel hide and spaced at intervals of five to seven days' travel. Along his route were the bones of merchants who had died of thirst after their caravans had been caught in sirocco sandstorms that had covered these precious sources of water.²²

A few years after his return, al-Hasan al-Wazzan embarked on traveling missions in his own right. Commerce may sometimes have been a goal: over the years he crossed the Saharan deserts and journeyed along the North African coast with merchant caravans of Muslims and Jews, and he had a keen eye everywhere he went for markets, fairs, goods, and prices. In a salt mine center in the Sahara, he once stayed three days, "the time it took to load the salt" to be sold in Timbuktu. Perhaps he was one of the sellers.²³ There was also a narrow escape while he was on a trip that seems to have been for trade. A snowstorm threatened his caravan of merchants as they crossed the Atlas Mountains with their cargo of dates, returning from the desert to Fez just before winter was setting in. Several Arab horsemen invited him, or pressured him, and a Jewish trader to go off with them. Suspecting that they might rob and kill him, al-Wazzan said he had to piss and sneaked off to bury his coins. He then survived one peril after another—their stripping him in the cold for his money (he said he had left it with a relative on the caravan), two days of snowstorm closeted with his dubious escort in a shepherds' hut—and emerged to discover that most of the caravan had perished in the snow and that his money was safe where he had hidden it.²⁴

Especially he traveled as the emissary, servant, soldier, informant, and ambassador of the sultan of Fez. Muhammad al-Burtughali, so called because he had spent his boyhood as a captive in Portugal, faced the same uphill battle as his father had to extend his power effectively beyond the region around Fez in northern Morocco. Tribal and military chieftains, Berber and Arab—a long-term presence throughout North Africa—continued their domination of many towns, mountain settlements, and nomadic communities through alliance and force. As is evident from al-Wazzan's own writing, the sultan's governors and agents in

these areas could be sure neither of substantial tribute and taxes nor of the supply of horsemen for the royal army. Sometimes gunpowder and marriage alliances tipped the balance for the Wattasids. Facing serious revolt in the eastern Middle Atlas town of Debdou in 904/1498–99, Muhammad al-Shaykh had finally triumphed by marshaling eight hundred harquebusiers against the crossbowmen of the rebels. After their capitulation, the sultan married his two daughters to the sons of the repentant Zanata Berber chieftain. When al-Wazzan visited Debdou in 921/1515, the old leader was still loyal to Fez.²⁵

Meanwhile the Portuguese were making inroads along the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts, as they had been for decades. They usually started with a treaty in which a town made itself a vassal under the protection of the Portuguese king. Fortified Portuguese trade enclaves and Catholic priests followed. When the townsfolk became uncooperative and/or divided by factions, the Portuguese sent in their military force, as in Safi in 913/1507–8 and Azemmour in 919/1513. Henceforth the Portuguese planned to rule and trade under their own governors, collect tribute, seize Berbers and Arabs more easily to be slaves back home, and, as King Manuel I wrote in triumph to the newly elected Pope Leo X, win the entire kingdoms of Fez and Marrakesh for Christianity.²⁶

The Wattasid defense against the Portuguese was sporadic and often unsuccessful. Berber and Arab tribesmen were resistant to domination from Fez in any venture. Further, every Portuguese conquest was made with support from some parties among the local Muslims and Jews, who saw at least a provisional economic or political benefit from collaboration with the Christians. Muhammad al-Shaykh himself had consolidated the Wattasid hold on Fez by virtue of a peace treaty with the Portuguese, though his son Muhammad al-Burtughali now wanted, in al-Wazzan's words, "nothing but vengeance" against the Portuguese.²⁷

A striking example of this complicated politics is the Berber Yahya-u-Ta'fuf, a figure well known to al-Hasan al-Wazzan. In 912/late 1506, he was the accomplice of an ambitious friend in assassinating the Muslim mayor of Safi. He then prevented his co-conspirator from sharing

power in the town, gave support to the Portuguese even while intriguing with their opponents, and took refuge in Lisbon when his life was in danger. Several years later he was back as lieutenant to the Portuguese governor, having been appointed because the inhabitants of Safi had requested “a Muslim to serve as an intermediary between the Muslims and the Christians” (or as al-Hasan al-Wazzan put it, because “the governor did not know the customs of the people”). Yahya-u-Ta’fuft proceeded, on the one hand, to delight King Manuel I by his military victories over Mulay al-Nasir, brother of the Wattasid sultan, and over the sultan of Marrakesh and, on the other hand, to anger the Portuguese governor by collecting taxes and issuing ordinances in his own name rather than in those of the Christian authorities. To Muslim leaders, Yahya claimed to be secretly supporting their cause and biding his time till he could attack the Portuguese; to King Manuel I, he proclaimed his loyalty. Meanwhile he built a base for himself among villages, towns, and tribesmen in the region east and south of Safi. Indeed, he issued ordinances with penalties for wrongdoing as if he were superior to the Maliki judges at Fez.²⁸

To this powerful intriguer, al-Hasan al-Wazzan brought a message, probably in the early summer of 918/1512, from Sultan Muhammad al-Burtughali, who may well have been trying to discover Yahya’s actual position in regard to the Portuguese.²⁹ In delivering the message, al-Wazzan was also acting as spokesman for a man he called “the sharif, amir of Sus and Haha.” This was Muhammad al-Qa’im, founder of the Sa’diyan dynasty and known as *sharif*, that is, a descendant of the Prophet. In southern Morocco—in the deserts and valleys of the Dra’a region below the Anti-Atlas, where the Sa’diyan family had got its start; in the agricultural Sus plain between the Anti-Atlas and the High Atlas; and in the neighboring Haha region along the Atlantic coast with its merchants and herders—Muhammad al-Qa’im was winning support around this privileged genealogy, which transcended the tribal networks at the basis of the shaky Wattasid power. The Wattasid sultans sought legitimation from learned Maliki jurists like Ibn Ghazi, Ahmad al-Wansharisi, and their pupils, whose religious force came through

their power to imprecate and condemn. In contrast, the Sa’diyan sought legitimation from holy men of extravagant mystical practice, who predicted the coming of the Mahdi, or “guided one,” to bring righteousness to the world.

The supreme example was the Sufi mystic al-Jazuli (d. 869/1465), much revered by disciples and rural lodges in southern Morocco. His remains had been carried around by one of his followers in the course of rebellion against late Marinid and early Wattasid sultans and finally buried in Afughal, a settlement in Haha. To associate himself with al-Jazuli and his spiritual and political tradition, Muhammad al-Qa’im moved his court to Afughal in 919/1513 and, when he died in 923/1517, had himself buried right next to the saint.³⁰

Holy war against the Christians was a priority for the Sa’diyan sharif, and he was summoned to it by the local marabouts (*murabitun*, holy men) and the Sufi lodges, rural and, in some cases by now, urban. Trade with Spanish, Genoese, and Portuguese merchants was acceptable, but not the occupation of Dar al-Islam, the Land or Abode of Peace, by Christians. In the midst of Wattasid losses at Safi and elsewhere, Muhammad al-Qa’im could report victories against the Portuguese farther south. For this reason, the Wattasid sultan began to seek alliance with him, sending al-Hasan al-Wazzan in 918/1512 and 920/1514 with messages to facilitate joint military action. In the spring of 921/1515 al-Wazzan was part of a delegation from Fez to organize resistance with the Sa’diyan sharif against the Portuguese, then threatening the town of Marrakesh and its sultan. The troops fought together against the Christians and won.³¹

The Sa’diyan sharif’s aspiration went beyond the ousting of the Christians, however. “Al-Qa’im,” which he had added to his name in 915/1509, was part of a title: He Who Has Arisen by the Command of God. Supposedly he was hearkening to a prophecy of the great destiny awaiting his sons. Indeed, by the middle of the sixteenth century, the Sa’diyan would unseat the Wattasids in bloody battle and would become the ruling family of the whole geographical region that came to be known as “Morocco.” The seizure of Marrakesh in 931/1525 by