

# Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

---

## Black Africans in Renaissance Europe

**Review Number:**

619

**Publish date:**

Tuesday, 31 July, 2007

**Editor:**

Thomas F. Earle

Kate J. P. Lowe

**ISBN:**

9780521815826

**Date of Publication:**

2005

**Price:**

£65.00

**Pages:**

434pp.

**Publisher:**

Cambridge University Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.cambridge.org/uk/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=0521815827>

**Place of Publication:**

Cambridge

**Reviewer:**

Francisco Bethencourt

This book might come as a surprise for non-specialists, since black Africans are identified with slave trade to the Americas, while the Renaissance is regarded as a purely European phenomenon, centred on a largely homogeneous ethnicity. Neither of these assertions is true, and this excellent book helps to deconstruct such historical stereotypes. Europe received black Africans regularly and in significant numbers from the mid-fifteenth century onwards. The Mediterranean was a cross-cultural and inter-ethnic space even before Classical Greece. The Renaissance reflected not only the rediscovery of classical culture, but also the influx of techniques and ideas brought by the Arabs. Intercontinental navigation revealed simultaneous processes of cultural renovation, which helped to reshape Europe.

At the outset of the volume, Kate Lowe defines the editors' key question: how were the main stereotypes concerning black people established in this period? She provides several examples relating to the main set of prejudices: the African was generally identified as a naked person who would mutilate his/her face and body with scarification, piercings, and tattoos; he/she would be considered as carefree and characterized by immoderate laughter, unaware of his/her condition, lazy and sexually promiscuous, physically strong, a good

musician or dancer. Lowe recognizes the existence of noble or ennobled black men in European courts, but she stresses the role of black people as a necessary counter-image in the construction of European whiteness and 'civilization' (a notion coined in the eighteenth century). This is a necessary starting point, although some of the chapters develop a more nuanced vision of race relations in this period.

Anne Marie Jordan, for instance, has a fine chapter on slaves in the Lisbon court of Queen Catherine of Austria, where mainly women and children of different ethnic origins were used as musicians, cooks, pastry chefs, housekeepers, pages, or servants in royal apothecaries, kitchens, gardens, and stables. Jordan points out how white Moorish slaves were favoured because of skin colour prejudices, but black slaves were considered trustworthy for religious reasons. The black slaves were a sign of social prestige and distinction in a cosmopolitan court: this feature explains why Catherine spent so much money clothing and offering them as exotic gifts to her favourite ladies and relatives in other European courts. The representation of small black slaves in the portraits of Iberian princesses, as in the painting of Juana de Austria by Cristóvão de Morais, reinforced their image as symbols of empire building.

Jorge Fonseca presents the results of his research on sixteenth-century Southern Portugal, where he estimates a total of six to seven per cent of blacks in the population, mainly in urban areas, in contrast with the Northern region, where blacks were scarce. His analysis of the perceptions of black people by Nicholas Cleynaerts, a Flemish scholar who taught in Louvain, Paris, and Salamanca, spending several years in Portugal as tutor of infant Henry (the future cardinal and General Inquisitor), is less convincing. The scholar is presented as an 'exotic visitor', which is misplaced, since he belonged to the international Renaissance elite who circulated between different European countries. Cleynaerts bought young slaves and taught them as assistants. His observation that they were like 'monkeys' (meaning capable of imitating but not of creating) is considered by Fonseca as a sign of the contrast between two societies, the Flemish and the Portuguese, the first unaware of black people, the second used to them. It is disputable that Cleynaerts' classification of the young slaves as 'monkeys' was his own, and not influenced by the Portuguese, but the implicit assumption that the Portuguese were less 'racist' than the Flemish is questionable.

Didier Lahon proposes an interesting analysis of the mixed confraternity of Nossa Senhora do Rosário in Lisbon, which split into two branches of white and black members. The conflict that existed between them for more than one century, and the final victory of the white branch in 1646, is interpreted as a shift from a relatively tolerant society, open to manumission (one of the privileges of the confraternity) and to intervention against bad treatment of slaves, to a more rigid and intolerant society in the seventeenth century. The implementation of the obligatory baptism of slaves throughout the second half of the sixteenth century is also reconstituted in detail. The analysis of the impact of the notion of blood purity in Portugal is much less convincing, with a deficient chronology and huge gaps, while comprehensive studies are ignored. The idea that the Iberian Peninsula dealt with the presence of Moors, Jews, and New Christians as an anomaly from 1350 onwards is simply wrong, as Maria José Ferro Tavares and Maria Filomena Lopes de Barros have demonstrated.

Thomas Earle focuses his study on the work of Afonso Álvares, a mulatto poet and playwright, cautiously alerting the reader to the lack of evidence to prove that they were one and the same person. Álvares is one of the few mixed-race intellectuals in Europe in the sixteenth century. He wrote satirical poems and four plays based on saints' lives, commissioned by the Augustinian canons of São Vicente de Fora in Lisbon. Earle discusses the quality of the plays and convincingly refuses the historical devaluation of the writer, who has been seen as a minor disciple of Gil Vicente. A particularly interesting section concerns the polemic in satirical redondilhas between Afonso Álvares and another poet, António Ribeiro Chiado. Álvares accused Chiado of low birth and immorality. Chiado insulted Álvares in racist terms, accusing him of being a mulatto, son of a black woman, a slave freed by marriage. Álvares underlined the nobility of his father whose identity was never disclosed; it might have been Dom Afonso de Portugal, bishop of Évora, in whose household Álvares was educated. In his plays, Álvares reflects the dominant anti-Semitic mood. There is sufficient material here for a deeper reflection on the racial prejudices of the Portuguese Renaissance society and on the conflicting mechanisms of social promotion among subaltern groups.

Jeremy Lawrence presents a very good overview of the Black Africans in Spanish literature, identifying the main ideas: dehumanization of slaves as chattels, defined by bestiality, nakedness, lascivious vulgarity, burlesque behaviour, pidgin language. He focuses his study on the 'habla de negros' enlarging the already significant bibliography on the subject (the crucial study by Paul Teyssier on Gil Vicente could have been mentioned). The author selects less known texts and provides two excellent critical editions of pliegos in the appendix. The originality and subversive meaning of the poems is brought out clearly in this chapter, since they staged strong black characters with unconventional relations with white women. Baltasar Fra-Molinero is another author who has extensively written on blacks in Spanish literature, and has contributed to changing the field. He has shown how this marginal and neglected topic played an important role in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here he concentrates on Juan Latino, the only black Latinist, scholar, and writer in the European Renaissance, who lived in Granada. He has previously pointed out how Juan Latino reflected on the black condition and refused a social hierarchy based on skin colour prejudices. Fra-Molinero analyses now the poem *Austrias Carmen*, dedicated by Juan Latino to Juan de Austria after his victory over Morisco insurrection in Granada, known as the War of the Alpujarras (1568-1572). In the text, Latino searched to establish the dignity of all black Africans, relating them to biblical Ethiopia and refusing the idea of natural slavery. He imagines white people subordinated in Ethiopia (a reversed irony) and exalts blackness in the final verses.

Debra Blumenthal addresses a very interesting issue: the role of a black African confraternity in Valencia founded in 1472 by forty black freedmen that collected alms and negotiated contracts of manumission on behalf of their fellows in captivity. She knows the context of slave trade in Valencia well, the variety of the black community in the town, and the functions of the confraternity ('casa dels negres') as shelter, hospice, and hospital. She analyses two cases of manumission, concerning Ursola and Johana, in which all the financial, juridical, and social difficulties are analysed, as well as the subsequent barriers to full integration.

Aurelia Marín Casares, who has written a very good book on slavery in Granada, presents here part of her enquiry into free and freed black Africans in the region. She has identified most of their occupations: men were stable workers, esparto workers, smelters and casters in foundries, carriers and vendors of water or firewood, bakers, butchers, hod carriers, builders, diggers, pavers; women were housewives, farmers, embroiders, maids, taverns and inns employees, sorceresses. The author details the confraternities created by blacks and mulattos in Granada. The notion of blackness and the different types of black people do not become clear in this article, however, since in many cases Moriscos were considered black by the Christian population.

The 'Italian section' is one of the most interesting in the book. Paul Kaplan argues that Isabella d'Este and Andrea Mantegna created a new iconographic type: the black attendant to a white European protagonist. In his opinion, Judith's servant was depicted as black for the first time by Mantegna in a drawing from 1492. As the author points out, this idea of displaying black servants to suggest the universal reach of imperial power had already been coined by Frederick II. Kaplan stresses the diffusion of this idea among European rulers, namely the Aragonese kings of Naples or the ruling houses of Ferrara, Mantua, and Milan, in which black servants were used as human accessories and depicted as such. The only problem in this stimulating chapter is the uniform definition of 'blackness', while in several paintings (see for example the *Allegory of Virtue* by Correggio) there is a gradation of skin colour from black to brown.

John Brakett suggests that Alessandro de' Medici, the first duke of Florence (1529-1537) was of mixed race, an illegitimate son of Lorenzo de' Medici, duke of Nemours and ruler of Urbino (and a direct descendent of Lorenzo 'il Magnifico' and Cosimo 'il Vecchio') and a peasant woman, a freed slave, generally considered as a 'Moor', but now depicted as a Black African. The argument is based not on new documents but on the analysis of the set of images of Alessandro de' Medici. The problem lies in the final conclusion: the author considers that there was no intellectual racism in the sixteenth century, since the duke was murdered under the accusation of being a tyrant, but his racial status was not used in political debate or in denigration of his memory, which proves the supremacy of the innate quality of princes. This is an open issue: as the author mentions in his text, the duke was nicknamed 'the Moor' and 'the mule' of the Medici

in his lifetime, which suggests a more complicated picture.

Sergio Tognetti concentrates on the trade in black African slaves in fifteenth-century Florence. The percentage of East European slaves in North Italian cities was quite important by the end of the fourteenth century, mainly in Genoa (nearly ten per cent) due to the Genoese trading communities in the Black Sea, but the fall of Constantinople in 1453 ended this commercial exchange. The slave trade in black Africans spread throughout the fifteenth century, replacing the previous trade. Networks also changed, from Arab merchants to Portuguese ones. This careful research, based on the account books of the Cambini bank, shows the value of slaves (proving also how whiter skin was more appreciated than darker skin) and the overwhelming control of the market from Lisbon, confirming the role of Bartolomeo Marchionni as the biggest slave trader in those days.

The pastoral care of black Africans in Renaissance Italy is the subject of Nelson Minnich's chapter. The zigzag policies of the Popes from Martin V to Paul III is well documented, with successive bulls prohibiting the African slave trade (1425) and black slavery (1462), then allowing the trade with captive people (1455, 1456, 1493), and finally condemning the enslavement of native American people (1537), while the citizens of Rome were authorized to hold slaves (1548). The creation of black confraternities in Naples, Palermo, and Messina was a result of the activity of different religious orders among slaves and freedmen. The access of black people (slaves and freedmen) to the sacraments of penance, communion, and marriage is well documented, while the ordination of black priests was very rare—one Ethiopian and one Congolese bishop, suggested by the Portuguese king in 1513, were exceptional cases.

Anu Korhonen addresses the crucial proverb "washing the Ethiopian white" in Renaissance England. It became a metaphor for everything considered useless, irrational, and impossible. It was widespread in England, although the relatively frequent literary references to black people in literature were brief and stereotyped. Africans were explicitly related to apes, defined by unruly sexuality, a lack of reason, violence, and ugliness (English is the only language in which the same term, fair, is used for beauty and blondness). Although Korhonen quotes an impressive range of sources, some of them from a very early period, it would have been interesting to establish the turning point of the process of construction and diffusion of the stereotype.

Lorenz Seelig studies the fascinating case of the "Moor's Head" produced circa 1600 by the Nuremberg goldsmith Christoph Jamnitzer. It shows the features of a young African with full lips, broad nose, and curled hair, with a headband chased with eight "T"s. It is a heraldic work of art representing the armorial bearings of the Florentine Pucci family, coupled with the coat of arms of the Florentine Strozzi family. This splendid object, made of silver and rock crystal, is also a drinking vessel: the upper part of the head can be taken off, like a cover. Seelig relates the object to the German tradition of drinking vessels, the double sense of the word *kopf* and the practice of drinking from human skulls (relics of saints), which is documented until the late-eighteenth century. He points out that, outside of the ecclesiastical sphere, profane drinking vessels were considered signs of moral decadence such as in the tradition of fools' head cups. Cups, jugs, or oil lamps were represented as black Africans (Seelig indicates an early example from the workshop of Andrea Ricci, circa 1500, with deformed face, open mouth, and protruding jaw to hold the wick). But on the other hand, Seelig points to the statues or cameos of the black Venus and black Diana, or the dignified sculptures of black prisoners and ambassadors (namely by Pietro Tacca, Pietro Francavilla, Francesco Bordoni, Nicolas Cordier, Francesco Caporale), relating to a notion of a rich Africa which contradicts the ideas of savagery and poverty. The only slippery moment in the article comes when Seelig points out a contradiction between the role of Roberto Pucci as commander of the order of Santo Stefano, responsible for chasing African pirates, and the attractive representation of the African head in his coat of arms. This is exactly the origin of the fashionable heraldry of African heads in many medieval coats of arms in Europe, following the crusades and the naval conflicts in the Mediterranean.

Jean-Michel Massing writes a fascinating article on the representation of lip-plated Africans in Pierre Descelier's world map of 1550. In his typical manner of detective research (perhaps inspired by the paradigm *indiziario* founded by Giovanni Morelli), Massing shows the crucial meaning of two figures of

black men with enlarged lips, placed in central Africa, sitting opposite each other, probably bartering a gold nugget for a flowery plant. He reconstitutes the first accounts of the enlarged lips found in different parts of Africa, namely by Isidore of Seville, Rabanus Maurus, Vincent of Beauvis, and Alvise da Mosto. He traces the original image of the bartering scene, a woodcut from a Strasbourg edition of Ptolemy's *Geography* published in 1522. He rightly interprets the scene as an expression of the notion that 'such people' have no idea of the true value of things. But it is at the beginning of the article, when Massing defines the circle of cartographers in Dieppe and the powerful ship-owners like Jean Ango, who created huge friezes in his house and his chapel representing peoples of different continents, that the most interesting hypothesis of the book is produced. Massing sustains that Northern Europeans recorded in their drawings the features and material culture of other peoples of the world (Africans, Indians, or Americans) with greater care than the southern Europeans, namely the Italians, who were looking for aesthetic solutions and became relatively blind to the rich variety of non-European people. This hypothesis requires further enquiry, but it raises a very interesting issue, related to the idea of the art of describing studied by Svetlana Alpers for a later period, in seventeenth century Dutch Art.

The only problem of this book is the unbalanced space dedicated to Southern and Northern Europe. We have thirteen chapters concerning Southern Europe (Portugal, Spain, and Italy), and three about the rest of Europe (England, France, and Germany). We already have a significant number of books and PhDs on black slaves and freedmen in Portugal and Spain (Saunders, Tinhorão, Lahon, Fonseca, Stella, Martín). We needed to have more information on Northern Europe to understand how black Africans circulated and stereotypes in this area developed. This would enable us to answer better the following questions: why was the theory of races born in Northern Europe from the 1730s to the 1850s (Linnæus, Camper, Cuvier, Gobineau)? What were the precedents of that theory, not only from a colonial point of view, but also through an internal European dynamic of contact with African people?

But we have to be fair with the editors of the volume: the books published on black Africans in Portugal and Spain have not been translated into English and some of their main authors were invited to participate; the final result is a truly excellent, well illustrated set of chapters, which raise new issues and provide much information and analysis.

#### **Other reviews:**

h-net-reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php> [2]

amazon

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/0521815827/ref=dp\\_top\\_cm\\_cr\\_acr\\_txt](http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/0521815827/ref=dp_top_cm_cr_acr_txt) [3]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/619>

#### **Links:**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4117>

[2] <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11503>

[3] [http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/0521815827/ref=dp\\_top\\_cm\\_cr\\_acr\\_txt?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1](http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/0521815827/ref=dp_top_cm_cr_acr_txt?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1)