Introduction: The black African presence in Renaissance Europe

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The origins of this volume lie in my previous edited volume on *Cultural Links between Portugal and Italy in the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2000). While writing the introduction to that book, I thought I should include a few sentences on black Africans in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Lisbon, and in the course of preliminary reading (some of which was kindly suggested by Annemarie Jordan), I realised that Lisbon was the tip of the iceberg as far as Europe as a whole was concerned, and that little work had been done on the subject anywhere (one notable exception in English is A. C. de C. M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441–1555* (Cambridge, 1982), which was presciently ahead of its time). It was with this in mind that I conceived of the idea of a conference that tried to look at the subject from the vantage points of several European countries, and from differing interdisciplinary perspectives, and invited Tom Earle to join me as co-organiser, in order to have complementary specialisms on Renaissance Italian history and Renaissance Portuguese literature. The conference took place at St Peter's College, Oxford in September 2001, with 18 speakers, 5 each from the UK and the US, and 8 from mainland Europe. The range of disciplines centred on history, with 3 'ordinary' historians, 1 economic historian, 1 church historian and 2 cultural historians, but also included 3 art historians, 1 museum curator, 2 social anthropologists and 3 literature specialists. It is worth noting that although we were all Renaissance scholars, only some of the participants, notably Jorge Fonseca, Paul Kaplan, Aurelia Martín Casares, Didier Lahon and Baltasar Fra-Molinero, had been working and publishing on various aspects of the European history of black Africans for years, whereas others (including me) were relative newcomers to the field. The conference proved eye-opening in terms of the cross-country connections that could be made as well as in terms of recurrent interdisciplinary themes. We planned an edited volume from the beginning, and in the intervening period the participants have reworked and expanded their papers into chapters.

The present volume therefore concentrates on the greatly overlooked subject of the consequences (mainly for the Africans themselves but also

for Europeans) of the introduction of considerable numbers of enslaved sub-Saharan Africans into Europe in the hundred and fifty years succeeding the so-called voyages of discovery, that is in a period very roughly co-terminous with the Renaissance. It is of course absurd to treat black Africans as a homogeneous group in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, just as it is absurd to talk of Europeans in the Renaissance period. These concepts only have value as oppositional or contrasting terms, which is how they are being used here. No such place as a generic 'black Africa' existed or exists; Africa was/is a vast continent, full of cultural, social, religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity, and of regional difference. But the process of removing Africans to Europe in the Renaissance period served to rob them of these distinguishing features, taking away their old, nuanced identities and providing them instead with new, one-dimensional European ones by labelling them all as 'black Africans'. Arrival in Europe as slaves meant the systematic erasure of all the more significant aspects of their past, starting with their names, their languages, their religions, their families and communities, and their cultural practices, but it did not erase their appearance. Hence the use of the term 'black Africans' and, in order to maintain parity of terminology, the use of the similarly non-existent construct 'Renaissance Europeans'.

Although the vast majority of black Africans in Renaissance Europe were slaves, it was perfectly possible for sub-Saharan Africans not to be slaves in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, and significant exceptions to the rule were African ambassadors and Ethiopian pilgrims (who benefited from Ethiopian churches and communities at Nicosia and Rome).[1] The possibility of manumission also always existed, and within a few years, the first of these Africans were freed, and communities of freed (but usually poverty-stricken) black Africans lived cheek-by-jowl with the constantly renewed larger numbers of black African slaves. Yet the words Renaissance and sub-Saharan African appear to have no obvious connection; indeed, it could be argued that they stand in almost complete opposition to each other. But the reality may be more complex. For example, while it may be true that (although the Renaissance was a period in which great store was set on literacy) most non-literate, enslaved West Africans transported to Europe received no education and therefore remained non-literate, this volume highlights several sub-Saharan Africans in Renaissance Europe with varying degrees of literacy and literary ability. The chapter by Jordan adverts to a black African who could

[1] On Rome, see P. Mauro da Leonessa, *Santo Stefano Maggiore degli Abissini e le relazioni romano-etiopiche* (Città del Vaticano, 1929), and on Nicosia, Renato Lefevre, 'Roma e la comunità etiopica di Cipro nei secoli XV e XVI', *Annali Lateranensi*, 11 (1947), pp. 277–94.

sign his name, that by Fonseca mentions black Africans who were taught Latin, and those by Fra-Molinero and Earle signal black African writers. It is our intention in this volume to consider this seemingly troubled juxtaposition by examining how the variety and complexity of black African life in Europe between 1440 and 1600 was affected by Renaissance ideas (including firmly held classical and medieval preconceptions relating to the African continent and its inhabitants) and Renaissance conditions. In other words, we want to understand why the reception of black Africans was as it was in Renaissance Europe.

At first glance, it might seem astonishing that the black African presence has been so completely ignored. The reasons for this are manifold, but an absence of material is not one of them. Far from being genuinely invisible, the traces of these fifteenth- and sixteenth-century black Africans can be found in almost every type of record: documentary, textual and visual; secular and ecclesiastical; Northern and Southern European; factual and fictional. The reasons for their perceived invisibility lie elsewhere, in the realities of national politics, in the still-evolving effects of European colonisation and in the straightjacket of fashionable or acceptable historical scholarship. The long history of black African settlement in many parts of Europe was denied for political and racial reasons, and the topic was successfully buried until the end of the twentieth century. So in general and with a few high profile exceptions, although copious material existed, each archival reference or image relating to black Africans in Europe brought into the public domain was treated as an isolated case. The fiction that not much material existed on this topic was aided by the nationalistic practices of European historians. European countries have tended to write their own history or the history of their major cities or areas, and it is very rare for problems to be studied in any depth on a European basis. In any case, non-nationals (or those viewed as outsiders) would not have been included even in national studies. Occasional historical studies that include sections on black Africans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries have emerged from Portugal[2] and the discrete parts of Spain,[3] the

[2] See, e.g., Pedro de Azevedo, 'Os Escravos', *Archivo Histórico Portuguez*, 1 (1903), pp. 289–307, and António Brásio, *Os Pretos em Portugal* (Lisbon, 1944), published by the Agência Geral das Colónias. More recently, José Ramos Tinhorão, *Os Negros em Portugal. Uma Presença Silenciosa* (Lisbon, 1988) was an important book.

[3] See, e.g., José Ramos y Loscertales, *Estudios sobre el derecho de gentes en la Baja Edad Media. El cautiverio en la Corona de Aragon durante los siglos XIII, XIIV y XV* (Saragossa, 1915), Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, 'La esclavitud en Castilla durante la Edad Moderna', in C. Viñas y Mey, ed., *Estudios de historia social de España*, 5 vols. (Madrid, 1949–60), and Vicenta Cortes, *La esclavitud en Valencia durante el reinado de los Reyes Católicos (1479–1516)* (Valencia, 1964).

two areas with the largest black populations, but usually in the context of examining slavery in these countries. However, these studies have been against the grain, and indeed until very recently most received little attention, because while the institution of slavery was considered worthy of investigation and analysis – as were slaves as objects – slaves as people were not thought to have enough agency to be suitably valuable research subjects during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Certainly in this respect cultural power – the power to define others – was indubitably linked to the political power to dominate, and the continuation and expansion of the European colonisation of Africa in the twentieth century was obviously detrimental to an interest in the study of enslaved sub-Saharan Africans in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe.

Each discipline has its own internal rules and rhythms, and much more research on black Africans in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe has focused on their representation in art and literature than on their historical realities, with Othello and the dramatic representation of Africans,[4] images of the black Magus[5] and Golden Age Spanish literature[6] receiving particular attention. The series of books on *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, sponsored by the Menil Foundation in Paris,[7] was very influential in flagging avenues that could profitably be explored (and Kaplan and Seelig have written on symbolic representations of black Africans). It is always pleasanter to dwell on those in positions of power than to confront slavery, which is precisely why the phenomenon of European slavery is often played down or obliterated. Politics have intruded here too, because the Fascist pasts of many European countries in the twentieth century (and their concomitant racist views) have precluded or impeded 'objective' scholarship for long periods of time. But the connections between these often slightly glamorous representations and real Africans have not been explored at any level. It has not helped that most black Africans who were not slaves were poor, and the poor until relatively recently were also not considered a topic that would respond well to scholarly investigation.

While they are not at all invisible, it cannot be denied that carrying out research on black African individuals in Renaissance Europe does

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[4] See, e.g., Elliott H. Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550–1688* (Boston, 1982).

[5] E.g., Paul H. D. Kaplan, *The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art* (Ann Arbor, 1985).

[6] E.g., Baltasar Fra Molinero, *La imagen de los negros en el teatro del Siglo de Oro* (Madrid, 1995).

[7] Ladislas Bugner (general ed.), *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, 4 vols. in 6 tomes (New York, 1976 – Houston, 1979).

present certain difficulties, mainly related to the combined 'drawbacks' of enforced Christianisation, legalised inferiority, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European inability to appreciate cultural difference, and a preoccupation with differences in skin colour. The most obvious difficulties stem from naming practices. The vast majority of black Africans were renamed at the start of their new lives in Europe, although a small minority managed not to be.[8] When they were baptised, they were given Christian names (usually from a small pool of the commoner saints' names) (see Jordan, chapter 7, and Tognetti, chapter 9). Many slaves or freed black Africans never graduated to possessing surnames, which also hampers secure identification. Most black Africans were slaves, and consequently were recorded as the possessions of other people. One of the most basic 'rights' enjoyed by slave owners was that of naming their slaves, and their naming practices often obfuscate the historical record, for a further tranch of slaves were given exactly the same names, both first names and surnames, as their owners, presumably so that their ownership was in no doubt. When sold to a new owner, they took the new owner's surname. This practice may have been a precursor to that whereby servants were known by the family surname. The effect was to make it very difficult to distinguish between master and slave in a document except through context. Precisely the same mindset and process were responsible for the naming of the Congolese 'royal family' and nobility: when the Manicongo (the Congolese 'king') Nzinga Nkuwu and his 'queen' were converted to Christianity and baptised in 1491, they took the names of the king and queen of Portugal, D. João and D. Leonor, their children were given other Portuguese royal names, and their relations and chiefs took the names of members of the Portuguese nobility.[9] As well as signalling a hierarchical relationship in Europe, taking or being given an identical name to a patron or owner was obviously construed as a sign of respect to the socially superior party.

Another huge problem in terms of identifying and tracing black Africans arises because most Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were completely incapable of distinguishing between different parts and traditions

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[8] See José Leite de Vasconcellos, *Antroponímia Portuguesa: Tratado Comparativo da Origem, Significação, Classificação e Vida do Conjunto dos Nomes Próprios, Sobrenomes, e Apelidos, Usados por nós Desde a Idade-média até Hoje* (Lisbon, 1928), pp. 368–74 for servant and slave names in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Portugal, and P. E. H. Hair, 'Black African slaves at Valencia, 1482–1516: an onomastic enquiry', *History in Africa*, 7 (1980), pp. 119–39 on black African slaves' names on arrival at Valencia in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

[9] António Brásio, ed., *História do Reino do Congo (MS 8080 da Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa)* (Lisbon, 1969), pp. 66–71.

of the African continent. European ignorance of Africa was almost complete, and very few Europeans at this date had ever been to sub-Saharan Africa. To the majority of Europeans, the defining feature of Africans was their skin colour, and nothing else – whether area of origin,[10] religion or previous occupation – mattered, and consequently nothing else was recorded. Without clearly differentiated names and without other identifying markers, descriptions of skin colour take on a paramount importance. However, as stated in the Notes on the text (pp. xv–xvii), the terminology of both outsider status and skin pigmentation was fluid and imprecise, and most of the time it is impossible to find out if the *moro* discussed (as it were) in a letter in February 1486 is the same person as the *nero* recorded in a will of 1494. These difficulties are a further reason why research into representations of black Africans (where these difficulties do not exist) is more advanced than studies of their lives.

An informed understanding of the black African presence in Renaissance Europe is vitally important to many cultural and historical narratives for a number of reasons. It is important for Africans and Europeans because it focuses on the moment when significant numbers of black Africans were first transported into Europe, and it is therefore legitimate to search here for the beginnings of individual and institutional prejudice and discrimination, as well as for the beginnings of acceptance of difference, successful assimilation and the first attempts at formulating black perspectives and creating black identities among communities in Europe. It is important for Americans searching for the antecedents of the inhumanity of American and Caribbean plantation slavery. And it is important to everybody, because it is such a crucial, early episode of black African diasporic history.

The four sections of the book correspond to four distinct areas worthy of investigation, but there are many others. It seems more worthwhile to comment on a few themes raised across these sections rather than reiterate individual contributors' findings. The first question to be addressed (and the most frequently asked question by those outside the field) is whether 'racism' in any generally accepted contemporary sense existed in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, a period in which the modern concept of 'race' is not generally believed to have been formulated.[11] As the reader will see, forms of 'racism'

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[10] Aurelia Martín Casares, *La esclavitud en la Granada del siglo XVI: género, raza y religion* (Granada, 2000), pp. 151–5 considers the places of origin and ethnographies of sub-Saharan African slaves in Granada in the sixteenth century.

[11] Different disciplines take different views on this matter. See *The William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 54: 1 (1997) devoted to 'Constructing race: differentiating peoples in the early modern world'.

are discussed by several contributors (notably Lowe, Lawrance, Korhonen, Fonseca, Lahon, Brackett and Earle) and alluded to by several others, and various answers are posited. It is of course not really the right question, because scientific racism (which is the starting point for most modern discussions of racism) was not articulated fully until the nineteenth century, and therefore technically the answer is clearly no. It seems preferable to adopt an approach that does not read the present onto an historical situation but also that does not ignore the fact that there is something very familiar about the scenarios under discussion.

It does however seem clear that African ancestry and possession of a black skin led directly to all sorts of differentiation, prejudice and discrimination, and most of the contributors have signalled their interest in these historical forms of differentiation (evinced for whatever reason and with whatever attempt at justification) between Africans and Europeans. It should be stated immediately that differentiation of various sorts was also commonplace with regard to various other minority groups, often on the basis of religion (e.g. Muslims and Jews) and ethnicity (marginal Europeans such as peoples from around the Black Sea, and other non-Europeans, such as Amerindians and Japanese). There are two points to be made here about differentiation relating to black Africans. The first concerns processes of differentiation, and the second moments of differentiation.

There were two major, defining processes of differentiation for black Africans in Europe at this time. The first was a legal differentiation that had meaning for all new captives transported from sub-Saharan Africa – slave status was enshrined in law across Europe. In most areas, Roman law definitions and restrictions on slave rights and behaviour were already in operation, and were not modified when the changeover from a mostly white slave class to a majority black slave class occurred. However in some countries, for example, in Portugal under King Manuel, new legal codes were introduced aimed specifically at legislating for circumstances arising from the new influx and population of slaves. The royal legislation on slavery enacted between 1481 and 1514 was collected and included in the *Ordenações Manuelinas*, first published in 1514, with a definitive edition of 1521.[12] Legalised inferiority was therefore a very basic and very potent process of differentiation for black African slaves. A second defining process of differentiation was cultural (it could apply to either enslaved or free Africans), and took place because

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[12] A. C. de C. M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441–1555* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 113–33, esp. 113–14.

of European late medieval and (particularly) Renaissance notions of civilisa-
tion and barbarism. The European definition of civilisation depended upon
an Aristotelian typology for assessing alien people, and dividing them into
the civilised and the barbarian. Civilised people could be distinguished from
barbarian people on the basis of a number of factors concerning hierarchi-
cal structure, social organisation and collective memory, made manifest by
the construction of civil society in the guise of the foundation of cities, the
establishment and implementation of written laws, the existence of written
histories, adherence to rules governing inheritance and the institution of mar-
riage, correct commercial relations and the use of clothes as differing status
indicators.[13] In general, this exclusive Aristotelian taxonomy allowed Europe
to categorise itself (and its inhabitants) as civilised and Africa (and its inhab-
itants) as uncivilised, but even when evidence was found in (for example)
the Congo of many of these Aristotelian prerequisites, the taxonomy could
be ignored and Europeans could still define the Congloese as barbarians. A
very immediate and obvious difference that allowed the process of cultural
differentiation to be set in train was the difference in skin colour between
Europeans and sub-Saharan Africans.

In addition to distinguishing between various processes of differentiation,
it is salutary to examine moments of differentiation between black Africans
and white Europeans in the Renaissance. Some of the most crippling of these
for black Africans were highlighted by formal and informal exclusionary
practices. For example, certain formal exclusionary work practices had the
force of law, such as guild regulations that sometimes, as in the charter of the
goldsmiths of Lisbon, forbade the inclusion of slaves; the charter of the pie-
makers of Lisbon, however, banned slaves and free Moriscos but allowed free
and Christian black Africans and mulattos to be considered for inclusion.[14]
Informal exclusionary practices appear to have been routinely practiced by
the Catholic Church, both in relation to sub-Saharan Africans in Africa and
to black Africans in Europe, so that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries
there is a dearth of black priests, monks or nuns (who were not lay brothers
and sisters) (see Minnich, chapter thirteen), only one black African bishop,
the Congolese D. Henrique (who was ordained as bishop of Utica on the
understanding that he could not have a European diocese or flock, but 'only'
an African one), and no black cardinal. The first black saint – known as San

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[13] Jeremy Lawrance, 'The Middle Indies: Damião de Góis on Prester John and the Ethiopians',
   Renaissance Studies, 6 (1992), pp. 306–24 at 322–3.
[14] Saunders, *A Social History*, pp. 74–5.

Benedetto il moro – lived in the sixteenth century but was not canonised until 1807.[15]

The detail that no marriage alliances were concluded between African and European rulers in this time period is also an indication of differential practices, as alliances were concluded between the ruling houses of virtually all European powers. As far as is known, the question of marriage was only raised on two occasions. A pair of marriage alliances (involving a reciprocal double marriage) was proposed between the ruler of Aragon, King Alfonso V, and the ruler of Ethiopia, the emperor Ishaq, in 1428: Ishaq was to marry Alfonso's sister, Joana d'Urgell, and the Infante Don Pedro was to marry an unspecified Ethiopian princess. Whether these proposals were ever a concrete reality is unclear, but for unknown reasons nothing came of them.[16] A letter from Queen Eleni of Ethiopia to King Manuel, probably in the second decade of the sixteenth century, also suggested marriages between their sons and daughters, without being more specific.[17] Black African slaves (and in many cases freed black Africans) were also very often excluded from common welfare and a common humanity by being denied access to marriage, family and community. Other moments of differentiation can be observed when white Europeans and black Africans came into competition with each other, whether in terms of occupation, or as witnesses giving testimony, or as sexual partners. Finally, much can be learnt from moments when casual differentiation is turned on its head, such as in the offhand comment Olivares made to Philip II of Spain when reporting an audience of Pope Sixtus V with the English cardinal William Allen in 1588: 'he treated him like a black man'.[18] All these processes and moments of differentiation expose the fact that differential behaviour based upon perceived difference (of whatever sort) was the norm in Renaissance Europe. Both Elizabeth I's letter and warrant of July 1596 and her proclamation of January 1601 ordering the expulsion of all black Africans (described as 'Blackmoores', 'Blackamoores' and 'Negroes') from England,[19] and the introduction of the concept of 'purity of blood' (*limpieza de sangre*) that

[15] On S. Benedetto il moro's canonisation saga, see Giovanna Fiume and Marilena Modica, eds., *San Benedetto il moro: santità, agiografia e primi processi di canonizzazione* (Palermo, 1998).

[16] Peter P. Garretson, 'A note on relations between Ethiopia and the Kingdom of Aragon in the fifteenth century', *Rassegna di studi etiopici*, 37 (1993), pp. 37–44, esp. 41–2.

[17] Sergew Hable-Selassie, 'The Ge'ez letters of Queen Eleni and Libne Dingil to John, King of Portugal', in *IV Congresso internazionale di studi etiopici*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1974), I, pp. 547–66 at 557 and 566.

[18] *The Letters and Memorials of William Cardinal Allen (1532–1594)* ed. by Fathers of the Congregation of the London Oratory (London, 1882), p. 309: 'le trato como a un negro'. I am gratfeul to Stefan Bauer for this reference.

[19] Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London, 1984), pp. 10–12.

took hold on the Iberian peninsula in the sixteenth century,[20] relied heavily upon already accepted antecedents.

The part skin colour played in this differentiation was crucial for sub-Saharan Africans.[21] In the intensely status-conscious and hierarchical societies of fifteenth-century Europe, powerful stereotypical representations of the 'other' (the Jew, the Moor, the African) were already elaborately crafted from classical and medieval sources (see Massing, chapter 2), and it is not difficult to locate the sub-Saharan African within this taxonomy. Later, Jews and black Africans may have clashed over their place in this pecking order (see Earle, chapter 16), as happened in other eras and situations when two 'immigrant' communities competed for resources and survival. However, what must have been truly remarkable was the unprecedented spectacle of 'blackness' (see Korhonen, chapter 4), presented first at Portuguese ports and later at Spanish ones when the first shipments of black Africans started to arrive in the 1440s (see Lahon, chapter 12). The reality of blackness swept away some previous notions about black skin and reinforced and transformed others. African blackness was at that moment presented in a peculiarly reductive and pre-emptive way. The Portuguese royal chronicler Gomes Eanes de Zurara, writing *c.* 1453–4, has left an eye-witness account (probably an amalgam of a lost narrative of Afonso Cerveira and his own memory of slave auctions)[22] of the landing of the first sizeable group of black Africans – about 250 – at Lagos in the Algarve on 8 August 1444.[23] Even allowing for the superlatives of rhetorical convention, the homecoming scene enacting the consequences of conquest was extraordinary. The local inhabitants were given a holiday from work and were encouraged to play their part in the spectacle by being the awed audience. The captive, conquered black Africans were virtually or completely naked, and in chains. The free, triumphant white Portuguese separated their human booty into five equal groups, in the process dividing family units, whereupon the Africans began to scream and cry, and some began an African chant. Zurara and the audience of the day supposedly were moved by

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[20] On this, see Albert A. Sicroff, *Les controverses des statuts de "pureté de sang" en Espagne du XVe au XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1960), esp. pp. 63–139.

[21] See Steven A. Epstein, *Speaking of Slavery: Color, Ethnicity and Human Bondage in Italy* (Ithaca and London, 2001), p. 108 for a discussion of the range of skin colours used to describe fourteenth-century slaves in Florence.

[22] On Zurara's account, see Peter Russell, *Prince Henry 'the Navigator': A Life* (New Haven and London, 2000), pp. 239–45.

[23] Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *Crónica dos Feitos Notáveis que se Passaram na Conquista da Guiné por Mandado do Infante D. Henrique*, ed. Torquato de Sousa Soares, 2 vols. (Lisbon, 1978–81), ch. 25, II, pp. 145–8.