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0521815827 - Black Africans in Renaissance Europe
Edited by T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe
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Black Africans in Renaissance Europe

This highly original book opens up the almost entirely neglected area of the black African presence in Western Europe during the Renaissance. Covering history, literature, art history and anthropology, it investigates a whole range of black African experience and representation across Renaissance Europe, from various types of slavery to black musicians and dancers, from real and symbolic Africans at court to the views of the Catholic Church, and from writers of African descent to black African 'criminality'. The main purpose of the collection is to show the variety and complexity of black African life in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, and how it was affected by firmly held preconceptions relating to the African continent and its inhabitants, reinforced by Renaissance ideas and conditions. Of enormous importance both for European and for American history, this book mixes empirical material and theoretical approaches, and addresses such issues as stereotypes, changing black African identities, and cultural representation in art and literature.

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Sergio Tognetti's chapter was translated by Kate Lowe and Didier Lahon's by Jane Jones and T. F. Earle.

Notes on the text

Please note that as this book engages with a subject that has only recently been considered of universal interest, the terminology is still emergent. It has been influenced in the past by different 'national' traditions, and translation of some of these terms into English is approximate. There has also been discussion about the significance and import of some of these European labels. Occasionally choices have had to be made in the interests of clarity; an example of this is the word 'slave', which has been used throughout (even though the word 'captive' is often preferred by Iberian scholars). Sometimes we have been forced to choose what appears to be the least bad option, and on this basis – in the absence of a better alternative – we are using 'mulatto' to describe a person of mixed black and white parentage. This is the Anglicised version of the Portuguese and Spanish word *mulato*, which was often used to mean 'mule' in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Although its depreciative quality when applied to human beings at the time is obvious, we of course have stripped away any sense of that in our usage.

A variety of different words could signify a black African or person of African descent in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century documentation in Europe, and these varied according to locale and according to the level of knowledge of the person concerned. One major difficulty is that black people in Renaissance Europe were routinely distinguished according to their skin colour or their supposed religion rather than according to their place of birth or language, and consequently it is usually impossible to know (without additional documentation) whether an individual had been born in Africa and brought to Europe as a child or an adult, or was second generation and had been born in Europe. In the interests of keeping the word length of this book under control, the reader should understand that in most cases when the term 'black African' has been used, it could also denote a second-generation person of African descent.

The issue is further complicated by the use of Latin in some documents as opposed to the vernacular (Portuguese, Spanish, Italian etc.) in others, and conventions could differ between languages. Some words were (in some places) rather vague, and may or may not have denoted someone from sub-Saharan

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Africa – for example, someone described as a *moro* (Moor) in many parts of Italy may or may not have been black. Even the phrase ‘*moro nero*’ might not have referred to a person from sub-Saharan Africa but to a dark-skinned North African. All over the Italian peninsula, however, the words ‘*moro negro*’ definitely referred to a black African. *Nero* as a noun did not necessarily denote a black African (although it often did, especially when used in opposition to *bianco* or white), but the noun *negro* always indicated a black African.

Portuguese also has two words meaning ‘black’, *negro* and *preto*. A correct writer, the historian João de Barros, using a formal register, never used *preto* to mean a black human being or animal – it was applied only to inanimate objects. In informal language *preto* did refer to people and was depreciative, as it still is today, because it emphasised blackness rather than humanity. In Spain, precise meaning varied from place to place: for example, in Valencia, the word *moro* signified a North African Moor, and *negre* was the word consistently used for a black African, whereas in Granada the word *negro* could include (amongst other groups) both sub-Saharan and North Africans.

Conversely, the word ‘Ethiopian’ in all the vernaculars and in Latin did not necessarily signify someone from Ethiopia but was more generally used to refer to someone with a black skin from Africa; the same is true of the phrase ‘from Guinea’ or people described as ‘Guineans’. In Italian, someone described as an *africano* usually came from sub-Saharan Africa, but someone described as ‘da Africa’ (from Africa) could have come from any part of the continent. Finally, and still more confusingly for the uninitiated, other words whose meaning should have been fixed were also fluid and flexible, so that *indiani* in a Roman context could equally refer to either people from India or people from Ethiopia (the land of Prester John of the Indies). Given all this diversity, we have not attempted any standardization but have left it up to individual contributors to define their own terms and set the parameters of their own discussions. For further elucidation of some of these terms, please see the relevant discussion in Tognetti (pp. 217 and 219), Blumenthal (p. 229), Martín Casares (p. 248), Minnich (p. 282) and Brackett (p. 303).

Two further terms appear in some Italian notarial documents, making the distinction between a black African who was *selvaticus* (wild or savage, that is someone who came directly from Africa) and one who was *casanicus* (domesticated or home-born, that is someone who had been born in Europe). This may be correlated with the discussion of those people who only spoke African languages as opposed to those who spoke a European vernacular. The most commonly used term here for Africans who could not speak Portuguese was *boçal* (Spanish *bozal*) but the word could also be used adjectivally (and pejoratively),

approximating to 'just off the boat' or 'straight from the bush'. Those black people who could only speak Portuguese or Spanish badly had their 'pidgin' described as 'fala de preto' or 'habla de negros'. For discussion and use of these terms, see Lawrance (pp. 72 and 83), Blumenthal (p. 230), Martín Casares (p. 251) and Earle (p. 346).

A final note is necessary about the numbers of black Africans in various parts of Europe in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. This is a vexed question, but because of all the difficulties inherent in their study, it is highly unlikely that estimates will ever be very precise. Numbers were highest in Portugal and Spain. For estimates for Portugal, see Fonseca (pp. 115–16) and Jordan (p. 157), for estimates for Spain see Lawrance (p. 70) and Martín Casares (p. 250), and for some discussion of the situation in Valencia, see Blumenthal (p. 229). Elsewhere in Europe, numbers were considerably lower, but could still be significant.