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The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought

James H. Sweet

THE question why African slavery emerged as the primary form of exploited labor in the Americas during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has engaged the attention of scholars for years. Although a consensus seems to have emerged that the growth of capitalism played a major role in the establishment and survival of African slavery in the Americas, heated debate continues over the extent to which racism played a part in this development. The issue of which came first, racism or slavery, is central to this debate: some historians accept Eric Williams's assertion that "slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery."¹ Though the origins debate may at first glance seem artificial or analytically unimportant, it can reveal fundamental truths about the trajectory of racist ideology in Western culture. Locating the crystallization of racist ideology in Europe before 1492 shifts the focus of the origins debate from American economic explanations to European cultural ones. The search for the roots of a racial ideology might begin in ancient times; this article explores only the immediate foundations of racism in modern Western thought.

Many historians of colonial Latin America insist that racism was not present in Iberia before 1492. They argue instead that racial stratification was a product of American economic conditions.² This article contends that

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¹ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944), 7.

² For several perspectives on this issue see Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York, 1986); H. Hoetink, *Slavery and Race Relations in the Americas: Comparative Notes on their Nature and Nexus* (New York, 1973); C. R. Boxer, *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415–1825* (Oxford, 1963); and Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, trans. Samuel Putnam (New York, 1946). Of these scholars, only Boxer suggests that race may have been an important factor in Portuguese-African relations before 1492. He dispels the myth that the Portuguese considered Africans their equals by demonstrating Portuguese antipathy toward African religions, value systems, patterns of behavior, and physical appearances. But he falls short of showing the development of a racist ideology in Portugal. In the scholarship of Spanish and Portuguese America, there is no explicit, developed body of work on the origins debate as there is for the United States. For the clearest enunciation of the origins debate in the U. S. see Alden T. Vaughan, *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (New York, 1995).

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racism and capitalism were not inextricably bound together and that the racism that came to characterize American slavery was well established in cultural and religious attitudes in Spain and Portugal by the fifteenth century. Such attitudes were reinforced by European political turbulence and the decline of the Mediterranean slave trade. The racist beliefs that Iberians and others would later refine to a "science" were firmly entrenched before Christopher Columbus made landfall in the Americas.³ This racial idiom became more rigid as capitalist imperatives gained strength. While these views do not entirely contradict Williams's thesis, they move away from mechanistic economic explanations and attempt to show the evolution of racist thinking from feudalism to capitalism, from Europe to the Americas.

To use the term race in a fifteenth-century Iberian context may be problematic. The social context must be considered when examining the functions of racial identifications. Though the concept of race was not unknown in the fifteenth century, the words *razza* in Italian, *raza* in Castilian, *raça* in Portuguese, and *race* in French simply referred to a group of plants, animals, or humans that shared traits through a shared genealogy.⁴ Not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did "scientists" begin using "race" to legitimize claims of human biological superiority and inferiority.

Though the pseudoscientific classification of persons based on race in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave greater legitimacy to racism, this new science merely reinforced old ideological notions. Some might argue that medieval and premodern prejudices were based on European ideas of civility, religion, or culture. But the imposition on all humanity of a universal culture and a European conception of man sidesteps the issue of racism. Early modern Europeans conflated what we now call "culture" with what we now call "race." Thus, for the early modern period, race and culture cannot be easily separated. A people's inferior culture implied a biologically inferior people. Behavioral patterns and lifeways that Europeans viewed as aberrant were linked to genetically fixed qualities—especially phenotype and skin color. Even when these inferior Others adopted European cultural and religious forms, they could not avoid the stigma of cultural inferiority that their physical appearance proclaimed. The dialectic between culture and

³ In addition to the pioneering work of Boxer, other scholars have commented on the cultural and religious prejudices of Europeans toward Africans, but none has suggested that the ideological bases of American-style racism were established in early modern Europe. See, for example, Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), and *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983); William McKee Evans, "From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea: The Strange Odyssey of the 'Sons of Ham,'" *American Historical Review*, 85 (1980): 15–43; Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Washington, D.C., 1996); A. C. de C. M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441–1555* (Cambridge, 1982); Russell-Wood, "Before Columbus: Portugal's African Prelude to the Middle Passage and Contribution to Discourse on Race and Slavery," in Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford, eds., *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View* (Washington, D. C., 1995), 134–68; and Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968).

⁴ Lyle N. McAlister, *Spain and Portugal in the New World: 1492–1700* (Minneapolis, 1984), 53.

phenotype operated in such a way that sub-Saharan Africans were unable to escape their inferior status. Skin color, as an insignia of race, remained an indelible marker of cultural, and thus racial, inferiority.

The concept of race is a useful tool for understanding the dynamics of power relationships in the early modern period. Europeans invented themselves as whites, Africans as blacks, and, later, Indians as reds. In the resulting social hierarchy, whites were always superior, and blacks occupied the lowest rung. Indians and persons of mixed-race descent fell in between. In Iberia, once the traits of the infidel and the slave became associated with blackness, race became the driving force in the formulation of Spanish and Portuguese attitudes toward sub-Saharan Africans. For the purposes of this article, racism can be understood as a reduction of the sociocultural to the somatic.

Muslim Antecedents

The racist ideologies of fifteenth-century Iberia grew out of the development of African slavery in the Islamic world as far back as the eighth century. From 711 until their expulsion in 1492, Muslims controlled a significant portion of the Iberian peninsula. At its height, the Muslim world extended east to China. Wide-ranging Islamic influence had profound effects on the thinking of Iberians and, in many respects, charted the course of emerging racial hierarchies.

By the ninth century, Muslims were making distinctions between black and white slaves. These invidious distinctions are best reflected in the two Arabic words for slave. The word *'abd* (plural *'abid*), the traditional word for slave, embodied its legal meaning, but in the popular dialect, European slaves came to be called *mamluks*. The white *mamluk* commanded a higher price than the black *'abd* because he could bring a substantial Christian ransom or be exchanged for a Muslim captive.⁵ The differing treatment of white and black slaves reflected their relative worth. The *mamluk* was viewed as an investment to protect, whereas the *'abd*'s value was based on his labor as an expendable means of production. Wherever there was back-breaking work to be done in the Arab world, black slaves were made to do it. From ninth-century Iraqi land reclamation projects to fourteenth-century Saharan salt and copper mines, black Africans toiled under the worst conditions.⁶ White slaves were rarely assigned to such arduous tasks; they were usually household servants. This early

⁵ Bernard Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam* (New York, 1971), 63–64; Leon Carl Brown, "Color in Northern Africa," in *Color and Race*, ed. John Hope Franklin (Boston, 1968), 193.

⁶ For a study of a slave revolt involving thousands of black slaves used in the land reclamation projects of Iraq see Alexandre Popovic, *La Révolte des esclaves en Iraq au III^e/IX^e siècles* (Paris, 1976). For a report of 30,000 black slaves engaged in agricultural pursuits in 11th-century Bahrain see Nassiri Khosrau, *Sefer Nameh*, trans. Charles Sefer (Paris, 1881). For a description of black slaves mining gold and precious stones in the northern Nilotic Sudan from the 9th to the 14th centuries see Yüsuf Fadl Hasan, *The Arabs and the Sudan: From the Seventh to the Early Sixteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1967), 44–58. For black slaves in the salt and copper mines of the Sahara during the 14th century see Ibn Battuta, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*, ed. and trans. Said Hamdun and Noël King (London, 1975), 23, 32, 56, 58.

distinction, which identified blacks as subordinate Others, was not limited to slaves. Free blacks were also known as *'abid*. For the emancipated slave, *'abd* no longer carried its legal stigma, but the color distinction was no less pernicious. Opportunities for free blacks were limited to such lowly occupations as butchers and bath attendants. Thus even in freedom the black African performed the tasks of a social and ethnic inferior. From North Africa to Persia, blackness equaled slavery (*'abid*) and the degradation that slavery implied.⁷

Pejorative descriptions made by medieval Muslim travelers and scholars bring into sharp focus the debasement of blacks. One of the first Muslim travelers to record his contempt for blacks was Baghdad native Ibn Haukal. After traveling through Ghana and along the Niger River in the tenth century, Haukal wrote: "I have not described the country of the African blacks and the other peoples of the torrid zone: because naturally loving wisdom, ingenuity, religion, justice and regular government, how could I notice such people as these, or magnify them by inserting an account of their countries."⁸ Black Africa was the antithesis of Haukal's definition of "civilization." Negative cultural stereotypes were applied to the nations of Africa, thereby making racial judgments of individuals increasingly difficult to escape.

Iberian Muslims were not immune to these disparaging judgments. In the eleventh century, Toledo historian Sā'id al-Andalusi wrote a treatise describing the status of the sciences and learning among various nations. Sā'id commended all countries but those of the far north and far south for their impressive scholarly achievements, while holding black Africans in contempt.

For those peoples . . . who live near and beyond the equinoctial line to the limit of the inhabited world in the south, the long presence of the sun at the zenith makes the air hot and the atmosphere thin. Because of this their temperaments become hot and their humors fiery, their color black and their hair woolly. Thus, they lack self-control and steadiness of mind and are overcome by fickleness, foolishness, and ignorance. Such are the blacks, who live at the extremity of the land of Ethiopia, the Nubians, the Zanj and the like.⁹

Many of the characteristics attributed to black Africans as a result of climatic factors were applied to black slaves in the Muslim world. What is not clear is whether climate theory preceded and informed black slave stereotypes or the stereotypes preceded and informed climate theory. In any case, by the time Sā'id wrote, the two were reinforcing one another.

The remarkably candid diary of Ibn Battuta, drafted in the fourteenth century, reflects common thoughts and assumptions regarding the Islamic peoples of black Africa. When he passed through the Islamic kingdom of Mali in 1352, Battuta was nearing the end of a lifetime of journeying from

⁷ Evans, "From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea," 29–31.

⁸ Haukal, quoted in E. W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors* (New York, 1970), 61–62.

⁹ Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam*, 36.

his native Morocco to India, China, Sumatra, and East Africa. On reaching Walata, Battuta “regretted” his “arrival in their country because of the badness of their manners and their despising of the whites.” After first refusing an invitation to attend a gathering hosted by an important official, Battuta relented but, on tasting the local cuisine, complained, “Was it for this the black invited us?” Unhappy with their hospitality, Battuta “became sure then that there was no good to be expected from them” and decided to return immediately to Morocco.¹⁰ Battuta went on to express his likes and dislikes of the Mali people. Among their good qualities, he cited their peacefulness, their observation of prayer times, their knowledge of the Qu’ran, and their lack of interference with the property of white men. These virtues were overshadowed by such heathen customs as female nakedness, practice of traditional religions, and eating dogs and donkeys.¹¹ Battuta was quick to impose his sense of civilization on black Africans and expressed no sympathy for the black slaves he saw laboring in the salt and copper mines.¹² The common thread binding Muslim and later Christian racial imagery was as much a rejection of blackness as it was the outcome of the lighter-skinned ruling class’s desire to protect its position of superiority by celebrating its civility.¹³ Such racial and cultural stereotypes were regularly reinforced by the thousands of black slaves who flowed east to Persia and, later, north to Iberia.¹⁴ The inescapable constants were that almost all of these blacks or their ancestors had arrived as slaves and that their blackness was an immutable badge of inferiority. Negative racial stereotypes crystallized in the minds of whites over the duration of the trans-Saharan slave trade. As reflected in Arabic linguistic constructions, religious assumptions, and literary records like Ibn Battuta’s diary, blacks, regardless of their legal status, were always viewed as morally and culturally inferior. The Muslim world expected blacks to be slaves.

Fifteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldun expanded on the concept of black inferiority and its link to slavery. Khaldun asserted that “the Negro nations are, as a rule, submissive to slavery, because (Negroes) have little that is (essentially) human and possess attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals.”¹⁵ Khaldun’s somatic deductions are striking; blacks were suited to slavery because of their animal-like characteristics. As to the habits of these dumb animals, Khaldun reported that “most of the Negroes of the first zone [the tropics] dwell in caves and thickets, eat herbs, live in savage

¹⁰ Battuta, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*, ed. and trans. Hamdun and King, 26–29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42–48.

¹² *Ibid.*, 23, 32, 56, 58.

¹³ David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (Oxford, 1984), 45.

¹⁴ Estimates of the average number of sub-Saharan slaves that flowed from south to north and west to east along the trans-Saharan trade routes, 700–1500, range from 1,000 to 6,000 per year. Admittedly, these approximations are based on spotty literary and commercial records. Ralph A. Austen estimates that over 4 million slaves were transported across the Sahara during this period; Austen, “The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade: A Tentative Census,” in *The Uncommon Market: Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, ed. Henry A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn (New York, 1979), 23–76.

¹⁵ Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, 1967), 117.

isolation and do not congregate, and eat each other.”¹⁶ In his racial hierarchy, blacks occupied the lowest level of the sociocultural and biological order.

The most prevalent explanation for the presumed inferiority of blacks came from the Old Testament. The story of Ham has functioned to justify the subjection and degradation of blacks for over a thousand years.¹⁷ Interpretations of the curse of Ham can be found in the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of Jewish oral traditions that first appeared in the fifth century. Despite the absence of any characterization of Canaan’s children according to color, race, or ethnicity in the biblical version, in Genesis Rabbah the ethnic identification of the Sons of Ham had begun to shift toward the peoples of African descent. Noah says to Ham: “You prevented me from doing that which is done in the dark [i.e., coitus]; accordingly, your seed will be ugly and black.” The eighth-century Tanhuma version gives the story as follows:

as for Ham, because he saw with his eyes the nakedness of his father, his eyes became red: and because he spoke with his mouth, his lips became crooked and because he turned his face the hair of his head and his beard became singed and because he did not cover his [father’s] nakedness, he went naked and his prepuce became stretched, [all this] because all of God’s retributions are commensurate to a transgression.

Although the passage makes no reference to slavery or blackness, it presents a number of the negative stereotypes that were later applied to African slaves—deformed lips, crinkled hair, and elongated penises. Even though rabbinic interpretations never explicitly associated Africans with the sons of Ham, they certainly suggested future racial imagery.¹⁸

Islamic interpretations of Noah’s curse varied, but a tenth-century Persian historian, Tabarī, presented a typically racial response. In what is considered the major Arabic historical work of the period, Tabarī wrote:

Ham begot all blacks and people with crinkly hair. Yafit [Japheth] all who have broad faces and small eyes (that is, the Turkic peoples) and Sam [also called “Shem” or “Sem,” the mythical ancestor of the “Semites”] all who have beautiful faces and beautiful hair (that is, the Arabs and Persians); Noah put a curse on Ham,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁷ For a fine exploration of the complexities and contradictions in the evolution of the myth see Benjamin Braude, “The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods,” in this issue.

¹⁸ Genesis Rabbah 36 sec. 7 (Theodor-Albeck edition, 341 sec. 5); Tanhuma (Levy-Epstein edition, Noah 13; 29) For exaggerated versions of the Tanhuma interpretation see Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (Garden City, N. Y., 1964), 121, and Edith R. Sanders, “The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origins and Function in Time Perspective,” *Journal of African History*, 10 (1969), 521–32. A critique of these fabrications can be found in David H. Aaron, “Early Rabbinic Exegesis on Noah’s Son Ham and the So-Called ‘Hamitic Myth,’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 63 (1995), 721–59.

according to which the hair of his descendants would not extend over their ears and they would be enslaved wherever they were encountered.¹⁹

In Muslim cosmology, the sub-Saharan African emerged as the son of Ham, destined to perpetual servitude. The Hamitic curse provided a justification for the increasing debasement of sub-Saharan Africans. Muslim vilification of blacks was constantly being refined as blackness and slavery came to be regarded as synonymous.

Muslims came to view slavery as the condition that best suited sub-Saharan Africans. It had been an integral part of Islamic society since the religion's beginnings. Even the Prophet Mohammed was a slaveholder, and Muslim teaching associated slavery with nonbelief, making the heathen condition an excuse for enslavement. The black pagans of sub-Saharan Africa were the most vulnerable to Muslim conquest and enslavement for several reasons. First, Islamic law prohibited the enslavement of freeborn Muslims. Moreover, no Christian or Jew living under the protection of an Islamic government could be legally enslaved. Sources of servile labor had to be found outside of those countries living peacefully under Islamic rule. Until the late Middle Ages, captives were taken from north of the Mediterranean and south of the Sahara. When European political stability and military organization began to provide a formidable threat to Muslim dominance, after the eleventh century, the ethnically fragmented nations of Africa were a more inviting target for human exploitation.²⁰ Blackness quickly became a metaphor for servitude, and the curse of Ham legitimized the continued subjugation of black Africans.

Over time, Iberian Christians became acquainted with the Muslim system of black slavery and adopted the same sets of symbols and myths, with additional arguments. Not only were blacks not Christians, but they were the Muslims' servants, the heathen's heathen, doubly cursed by their status as nonbelievers and by their servile condition. The blackness of the sub-Saharan Africans contrasted more sharply with white Iberians than it did with tawny-colored Muslims, who constituted the majority of the Muslim population in Iberia and North Africa. The invidious perception of difference, expressed in language that suggested black inferiority, became refined and sharpened by Muslims, Jews, and Christians of Iberian origin.

The eighth century witnessed the first extensive contact between Europeans and sub-Saharan Africans in Iberia, as Moors, Arabs, and Berbers

¹⁹ Abū-Ga'far Muhammed b. Garir a-Tābarī, *Ta'rih ar-rusal wa'l-mulūk*, ed. J. De Goeje (Leiden, 1879), 223, quoted in Evans, "From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea," 33.

²⁰ By the 11th century, the decline in the numbers of Slavic slaves arriving in Spain might have precipitated a shift to African slavery. In addition, some scholars suggest that the Saharan trade in black Africans shifted toward Morocco during this period, thereby significantly increasing the number of sub-Saharan Africans available for purchase in Muslim Spain. See Olivia Remie Constable, *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain: The Commercial Realignment of the Iberian Peninsula, 900–1500* (Cambridge, 1994), 206, and Michael Brett, "Ifriqiya as a Market for Saharan Trade from the 10th Century to the 12th Century AD," *J. African Hist.*, 10 (1969), 347–64.

entered the peninsula with the invading Muslim armies. Along the Muslim-Christian border, racial and religious tensions were especially high. Christians identified Muslims as infidels to be eliminated in the name of the Christian God. Each side enslaved the other's prisoners of war, including women and children. Even though the Muslims ranged in skin color from white to very dark brown, nearly all were distinguishable from white Christians by their physical appearance. As anthropologist St. Clair Drake has pointed out, "skin color . . . became a marker used by the Christians to identify—and vilify—the Infidel."²¹

Non-Muslim Responses to Africans

During the period of Muslim domination of Spain and Portugal, Christians, who already equated color with religious infidelity, were well disposed to adopt the color prejudice of neighboring Muslims.²² The enslavement of black Africa's children was so well established among Andalusia's Muslim community that, in the thirteenth century, poet Ibn Sahl welcomed the beginning of spring with the following verse: "Spring has come, with his whites and his blacks; Two classes, his lords and his slaves."²³ How much of the racist ideology Iberian Christians actually internalized is difficult to measure. We do know that Latin texts of this early period adopted the Muslim distinction between light-skinned and dark-skinned slaves, thereby distinguishing the black as the Other. Light-skinned Muslim slaves were referred to as *sarracenus*, and dark-skinned ones were called *maurus*.²⁴ In addition to the religious and cultural differences between Christians and Muslims, Christians now made distinctions based strictly on "race" that appear with increasing frequency after the beginning of the fourteenth century. As early as 1332, documents relating to the sales of slaves show Christians differentiating white from black Moors.²⁵ Christians left few of

²¹ Drake, *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History and Anthropology*, vol. 2 (Los Angeles, 1990), 193.

²² For a more favorable view of race relations among Muslims see E. Levi-Provençal, *Histoire de l'Espagne Musulmane*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1953), 178. Based on the number of mulattoes in the "aristocracy and bourgeoisie" of Muslim Spain and North Africa, Levi-Provençal argues that these areas were free from color prejudice. He asserts that the Muslims "must be given this credit—color prejudice has never existed, no more in the Middle Ages than today." Not only does Levi-Provençal fail to acknowledge the numerous negative rhetorical characterizations of blacks, but he also refuses to see any color prejudice in the fact that the majority of these mulattoes were birthed by black slave mothers who were taken as concubines by Arab men.

²³ Ibn Sahl al-Andalusi, *Diwan*, vol. 10 (Cairo, 1344/1926), 108, quoted in Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (Oxford, 1990), 90.

²⁴ Charles Verlinden, *The Beginnings of Modern Colonization: Eleven Essays with an Introduction*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Ithaca, 1970), 37. *Sarracenus* sometimes referred to all slaves including blacks; 7th-century Catholic scholar and archbishop of Seville, Isidore, wrote that *maurus* meant *black*; James E. Brunson and Runoko Rashidi, "The Moors in Antiquity," in *Golden Age of the Moor*, ed. Ivan Van Sertima (New York, 1992), 27.

²⁵ One document describes the sale of a "*moro negro de color e capel crespo*." Another document, also from 1332, describes the sale of a "*moro branco de color*"; Archivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Convento de Almoester, liv. 5, nos. 19, 26. From José da Silva Horta, "A imagem do

the elaborate treatises that were so prevalent in the highly advanced Islamic societies, but the scant evidence of the Middle Ages and the parallels in Iberian rhetoric during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries suggest that the similarities in the evolution of slavery and the perceptions of black Africans in Muslim Spain and Christian Spain were great indeed.

Among the splinters of evidence that show antiblack sentiment is a description by Christian physician Ibn Botlan of the “Art of Making Good Purchases of Slaves”:

At the markets negresses were much in evidence; the darker the uglier and the more pointed their teeth. They are not up to much. They are fickle and careless. Dancing and beating time are engrained in their nature. They say: were the negro to fall from heaven to the earth he would beat time in falling. They have the whitest teeth and this because they have much saliva. Unpleasant is the smell emitted from their armpits and coarse is their skin.²⁶

For Ibn Botlan, the “engrained . . . nature” of African dancing and beating time and body odor were clear markers of inferiority. Such assessments were later embraced by Christians involved in the Atlantic slave trade.

Another example of a negative racial assessment deriving from non-Islamic sources in Iberia is the diary of Benjamin of Tudela. Known as *The Itinerary*, Benjamin’s diary chronicles his travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa between 1169 and 1171. Benjamin was a Jew from the northern Iberian region of Navarre. The range of interests exhibited in his *Itinerary* indicates that Benjamin belonged to a group of Andalusian Jews who sought the fusion of Islamic and Jewish cultural forms. His first language was Arabic, and he no doubt ranked among the region’s intellectual and social elite. Benjamin worked tirelessly in the Jewish community to help his less fortunate brethren.²⁷ Yet the sympathy Benjamin showed Muslims and Jews did not extend to blacks. The *Itinerary* provides a brief but telling glimpse of Benjamin’s thoughts on black Africa. Traveling south from Egypt, Benjamin described the people and places he visited. The influence of European ideas of civility is striking:

There is a people among them who, like animals, eat of the herbs that grow on the banks of the Nile and in the fields. They go about naked and have not the intelligence of ordinary men. They cohabit with their sisters and any one they find. When the men of

Africano pelos portugueses antes dos contactos,” in *O Confronto do Olhar: O encontro dos povos na época das Navegações Portuguesas, Séculos XV e XVI* (Lisbon, 1991), 66 n. 23.

²⁶ Botlan, “Introduction to the Art of Making Good Purchases of Slaves,” quoted in Adam Mez, *The Renaissance of Islam*, trans. Salahuddin Khuda Bukhish and D. S. Margoliouth (London, 1937), 161.

²⁷ Michael A. Signer, 1983 introduction to Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Travels in the Middle Ages*, intro. Signer, Marcus Nathan Adler (1907), and A. Asher (1840), [New York, 1983]), 17–18.

Assuan make a raid into their land, they take with them bread and wheat, dry grapes and figs, and throw the food to these people, who run after it. Thus they bring many of them back prisoners, and sell them in the land of Egypt and in surrounding countries. And these are the black slaves, the sons of Ham.²⁸

Amid the religious turmoil of twelfth-century Navarre, Benjamin demonstrated an unusual tolerance for religious and cultural differences at the same time he relegated black Africans to the status of animals. Though the religious justification for slavery is apparent in the reference to Ham, one must also focus on Benjamin's assessment of black cultural and intellectual achievement. Benjamin matter-of-factly concluded that, because black people were culturally inferior, they were naturally suited for slavery. The civilized lens through which Benjamin viewed African behavior led him to this conclusion.

A fourteenth-century Portuguese spiritual work reflects an assertion of cultural superiority that was remarkably similar to the one advanced by the Muslim historian Sa'īd al-Andalusi some 300 years earlier:

In the deserts of Ethiopia there is a people who live without law like beasts and they have women without marriage and they are called *Garamantes*. And there are others there who curse the sun, when it rises and when it sets, because it burns the land so strongly. There are others who live in caves and they eat snakes and anything else that they are able to swallow, and these are called *Trogloditas*. Others walk nude and they do not work and these are called *Grafasantes*.²⁹

Though Christians and Muslims regarded one another as infidels, adherents of both faiths found common ground in their disparagement of black Africans. The rhetoric of black African subhumanity reflected a set of shared understandings by Christians and Muslims on the Iberian peninsula.

The intersection of racial, cultural, and religious animus was manifested most clearly during the medieval period in the writings of the Castilian king Alfonso X, called "el Sábio." Generally believed to have fostered a thirteenth-century intellectual and spiritual renaissance in Castile, Alfonso X promoted a subtle philosophy of racial hostility and xenophobia.³⁰ Most of Alfonso's rancor was expressed in religious imagery by attacks on Jews and Muslims, and he reserved his strongest antipathy for the black Moors of Africa.

Among the most popular of Alfonso's many works was his *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, a collection of 427 poems extolling the virtues of the Virgin

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁹ Horta, "A imagem do Africano pelos," 48. See also *Orto do Esposo*, ed. B. Maler, vol. 1 (Rio de Janeiro, 1956), 117.

³⁰ For Alfonso's contributions to the culture of Castile see Robert I. Burns, ed., *Emperor of Culture: Alfonso X the Learned of Castile and His Thirteenth-Century Renaissance* (Philadelphia, 1990), and Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *The Learned King: The Reign of Alfonso X of Castile* (Philadelphia, 1993).

Mary.³¹ Many of the poems are believed by scholars to have been original works of el Sábio, with the remaining verses reworkings by professional poets of popular devotionals circulating throughout Europe. Regardless of their origin, Alfonso X claimed responsibility for the authorship of all 427 verses and bore the credit and the burden of their contents.

Though negative racial imagery permeates the cantigas, several examples stand out for their distinctions between white Muslims and black Muslims. Perhaps the most salient are Alfonso's descriptions of the Almohads and the Almoravids. In cantiga 385, Alfonso describes the preparations leading up to a great battle between Spaniards and Muslims.³² He says that Spanish sailors were preparing to go to war against two foes, "the Moors of Spain and the Africans"—two classes of enemy that had to be faced.³³ Even though Alfonso does not explain why he differentiates between the two groups of Muslims (to Alfonso, all Africans were Muslim), racial factors seemed to have entered into the picture. Both the Almohads and the Spanish thought the most "savage" and "barbarous" of the Muslims were the sub-Saharan Almoravids. Encroaching on territory once occupied by the kingdom of Ghana, these included soldiers who were phenotypically black. The Almohads were lighter-skinned Muslims from the Maghreb region of northern Africa and southern Spain whose frequent contacts with Spanish Christians no doubt framed Alfonso's more positive assessment. Despite being Muslim infidels, the Almohads were familiar to Alfonso as people who merited greater standing than their black co-religionists. This distinction could not have been created solely by white Christians. The ancestors of the Almohads had asserted superiority over sub-Saharan Africans for many years before the thirteenth century.

The most striking case of racial discrimination in Alfonso's *Cantigas* is a story of interracial and interreligious adultery. Cantiga 186 begins by describing a happily married couple threatened by the husband's jealous mother.³⁴ One day while the wife is sleeping, the mother-in-law orders her black Moorish slave to lie beside the wife, then calls her son to witness the scene. The townspeople find the two victims guilty of adultery and take them to the town square to be burned at the stake. The wife cries for help from the Virgin Mary and is miraculously saved; the Moor is allowed to

³¹ Alfonso X, el Sábio, *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, 4 vols., ed. Walter Mettmann (Coimbra, 1959).

³² "Como Santa Maria do porto guareceu un ome dúa pedrada mui grande de que nunca cuidara a guarecer, ca tiinna a tela sedada e tornou-se paralitico, e guarecé-o Santa Maria," *ibid.*, 3:328–30.

³³ "Fez y na marinna pera guardar os creschãos dos mouros e ser bastida pera guerrejar os mouros d'Españné e os afriçãos" (lines 8–11). The battle for power in Muslim Spain and North Africa was accentuated by a long and bitter ethnic rivalry between Arabs and Berbers. Though the rivalry peaked prior to Alfonso's time, Arabs and Christians continued to view African Berbers as uncivilized. One might suggest that race exacerbated these tensions, but there is no evidence for such a claim. For a description of the ethnic hostility among Muslims see David Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings: Politics and Society in Islamic Spain 1007–1086* (Princeton, 1985), 18–19, 32–33, 55–60, 126–32.

³⁴ "Esta é como Santa Maria guardou hũa moller do fogo, que a querian queimar," Alfonso X, el Sábio, *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, ed. Mettmann, 2:215–27.

burn. The content and accompanying pictures of cantiga 186 suggest that the Moor was punished in such a painful manner because of his color. He is “black as pitch,” and the pictorial panels show a very dark person with teeth resembling those of a wild animal.³⁵ While it should be stressed that Muslims and Jews generally are treated with scorn throughout the cantigas, the persons with the darkest skins are consistently portrayed as posing the gravest danger to Christian purity and receive more severe punishments than those meted out to other infidels. If these representations do not signify racism, they manifest a well-entrenched Christian aversion to blackness.

The strength of Iberian Christians’ distaste for blacks appears especially in their ideas about the underworld. The demons of hell were black, and Christians must have recognized the parallels to the literary portrayals of black Africans on earth. Both were evil, savage creatures who represented sin. The association of blackness with sin was a frequent theme in religious works. In the medieval manuscript *Visão de Túndalo*, the inhabitants of Satan’s realm are characterized in the following manner:

those demons were black like coal and their eyes were like oil lamps, and their teeth were white like snow and they had tails, like scorpions, and the nails of their feet and hands were made of sharp steel and . . . thus they threatened the soul, moving against others with the instruments they had, they tortured the other souls that went into the inferno.³⁶

Another Christian treatise that marginalizes blacks was written by an anonymous Franciscan friar. Believed to have been written in the middle of the fourteenth century, the book generally describes people, places, and forms of government. Though the author does not directly criticize blacks, he leaves no doubts as to his belief that they were different from other Christians. In describing the African peoples of Dongola, the friar says that they come from a “country well peopled with Christians from Nubia, but they are negroes.”³⁷ Despite the Nubians’ embrace of Christianity, the friar chose to qualify his theological endorsement by noting their blackness. To him, black Christians were contemptible on racial grounds alone. He goes on to reveal his thoughts on black intellectual abilities:

Preste Juan [Prester John] . . . rules over very great lands and many cities of Christians. But they are negroes as to their skins and burn the sign of the cross with fire in recognition of baptism.

³⁵ “*Negro come pez*” (line 63).

³⁶ Two Portuguese versions of the text have survived—one from the end of the 14th century and the other from the beginning of the 15th; “*Visão de Túndalo*,” quoted in Horta, “*A imagem do Africano pelos*,” 46. See also F. M. Esteves Pereira, *Revista Lusitana*, 3 (1895), 110.

³⁷ *Book of the Knowledge of all the Kingdoms, Lands, and Lordships that are in the World, and the Arms and Devices of each Land and Lordship, or of the Kings and Lords who Possess them*, trans. and ed. Clements Robert Markham (London, 1912), 32.

But although these men are negroes, they are still men of intelligence with good brains, and they have understanding and knowledge.³⁸

On the surface, the friar's words may seem complimentary, but his compulsion to explain that these blacks have "good brains" indicates a presumption of black intellectual deficiency. For this particular Franciscan friar, blackness had negative connotations that took primacy over matters of faith.

The Decline of the Mediterranean Slave Trade

While Christian Iberia inherited and embraced many of the negative Muslim perceptions regarding the capacities of black Africans, other factors also contributed to the growth of the African slave trade to Iberia in the second half of the fifteenth century. Political shifts in Europe and Asia had dictated the early Iberian slave trade in large part. When the Christian conquests came to an end in the 1260s, so too did much of the supply of Muslim slaves captured as prisoners of war along the frontier zones. Because Portugal and Castile were not integral parts of the Mediterranean trade until the fifteenth century, white slaves were not available in the same numbers as in the northern kingdom of Aragon.³⁹ Though some Caucasian slaves from Russia and the Black Sea were purchased through trade with Aragon, Castile obtained most of its servant population by raiding Muslim-occupied territory to its south. These raids along the Muslim frontier provided nearly all of Castile's slaves during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Even though a number of these Muslim captives were of sub-Saharan descent, it was not until the middle of the fifteenth century that a significant black slave population emerged.

The trade in Caucasian slaves from the east was curtailed when the only remaining bastion of Christian control over the Black Sea fell to the Ottoman Turks at Constantinople in 1453 and Ivan the Great rose to power in Russia in 1462. The Turks restricted the sale of light-skinned Muslims to western traders on religious grounds, and the emergence of a strong leader in Russia ultimately translated into state protection from slave raids.⁴⁰ Political developments combined with religious, cultural, and racial imperatives to propel the Castilian shift to black slaves. Though blackness had long been a reliable indicator of servitude, most of Castile's slaves were Muslim and Caucasian. After the 1460s, the institution of slavery would be considered the preserve of black Africans. Where blackness always had implied slavery in Castile, slavery now implied blackness.

The Portuguese were forced to adopt a somewhat different strategy in their acquisition of slave labor. They were the most isolated from the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁹ Verlinden, *L'esclavage dans l'Europe Médiévale Péninsule Ibérique—France*, vol. 1 (Bruges, 1955), 546–48.

⁴⁰ Evans, "From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea," 37–38.

Mediterranean trade routes of any of the Iberian kingdoms. As a result, they were even more reliant on prisoners of war as sources of slave labor. By the middle of the thirteenth century, the Portuguese Reconquest was completed with the absorption of the Algarve into the southern part of the country, and Portugal no longer shared a border with its Muslim enemies. Thus, other than the occasional foray across Castilian territory into Granada or into North Africa to purchase or abduct Muslims, the Portuguese were unable to secure a steady supply of slaves. Searching for new sources as early as 1317, King Diniz granted command of the kingdom's maritime fleet to the Italian slaver Manuel Pesagno, a Genoese captain licensed to course the Moroccan coast and entitled to one-fifth of all persons captured.⁴¹ Technological advances in navigation and ship construction allowed the Portuguese to sail their own vessels in the seizure of Ceuta in 1415, giving them a foothold on the North African coast, but after a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Muslims at Algiers in 1437, the supply of Muslim captives again came to a virtual halt. In the Canary Islands, both Castilians and Portuguese competed in the hunt for Guanche slaves but found too few to sate the thirst for captive laborers.⁴²

Before the mid-fifteenth century, the Portuguese showed no clear preference for either white or black slaves. The majority of Portuguese slaves were tawny brown, reflecting Arab, African, and European genetic strains in Muslim North Africa. But the subordination of blacks due to racial and cultural factors had long been a feature of Portuguese life. In Portuguese thinking, blacks were suited for slavery. Muslim racist expressions combined with inadequate supplies of servile labor to make sub-Saharan Africans the choice for Portuguese workers.

In 1441, after a series of exploratory missions down the West African coast sponsored by the Portuguese crown, Antão Gonçalves and Nuno Tristão met near the coast of Mauritania and determined that they must not return home without a profitable cargo. Landing near Cape Blanc, their men captured ten Idzāgen and, by chance, one of the Idzāgen's black slave women. Four Idzāgen were killed in the raid. The Portuguese royal chronicler, Gomes Eanes de Zurara, described the people as "barbarous and bestial . . . cunning."⁴³ Although only one black was captured in this raid, she was the first in a long line of black slaves brought to Portugal.

The Portuguese continued intermittent raids on the Idzāgen but increasingly turned to organized trade. In 1443, a Portuguese ship returned to the African coast and ransomed two Idzāgen noblemen for ten black slaves and a

⁴¹ Verlinden, *L'esclavage dans l'Europe Médiévale*, 548–59, 589, 593.

⁴² For a discussion of the beginnings of the Portuguese slave trade from Africa and the Canary Islands see Magalhães Godinho, *Os Descobrimentos e a economia mundial*, vol. 4 (Lisbon, 1981), 161, William D. Phillips, Jr., *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade* (Minneapolis, 1985), 107–13, and Russell-Wood, "Before Columbus," 134–68.

⁴³ Zurara, *Conquests and Discoveries of Henry the Navigator*, trans. Bernard Miall (London, 1936), 149. The Idzāgen (singular Azenūg) were a dark-skinned Berber people. For more on them see Russell-Wood, "Before Columbus," 140, and Saunders, *Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal*, 181 n. 3.

small amount of gold. This trade demonstrated the lack of economic value of sub-Saharan Africans vis-à-vis the Muslim Idzāgen. It also suggested that the Portuguese were willing to enslave a relatively unknown religious and cultural group. The moral defense the Portuguese offered for their enslavement of black Africans was illogical and contradictory, but the character of their explanations provides enormous insight into the fifteenth-century Portuguese worldview.

The Justification of Slavery

When the first black slaves to arrive directly by sea from Africa landed on Portuguese soil in the 1440s, the Portuguese were placed in the unusual position of having to justify the enslavement of these pagan captives. Earlier, any Muslims the Portuguese seized were subject to bondage. The war against Islam was a holy war. Hence, moral justification for enslavement was unnecessary. All persons captured in “just wars” were consigned to servitude. While Portuguese intellectuals agreed that “right authority” existed to conduct war against those nations that impeded the spread of Catholicism, they treated the African case differently. Despite Africans’ submission to Portuguese missionary efforts, the Portuguese still considered the capture and subsequent enslavement of Africans as part of a just war to convert heathens. Africans’ willingness to accept the Christian faith had no bearing on the Portuguese decision to seize them as human property. Papal approval reinforced this contradiction.⁴⁴

Several papal bulls issued between 1452 and 1456 confirmed the justice of enslaving black Africans. Nicholas V’s *Dum diversas* (1452) granted to King Don Alfonso V the authority to subjugate Saracens, pagans, and all other enemies of Christianity. Don Alfonso was permitted to claim all lands and property for Portugal in the name of God, and the inhabitants of the pagan lands were subject to perpetual servitude. Pope Nicholas V extended Portugal’s sphere of influence to include all territory from Morocco to “the Indies” with *Romanus pontifex* (1455). Calixtus III’s bull, *Inter caetera* (1456), expanded Portugal’s role to include spiritual jurisdiction over its conquered lands.⁴⁵ Papal endorsement represented, in effect, divine approval for the conquest and enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans as a mission for Christ. The popes thus blessed the sentiment expressed by Prince Henry in 1444 on the arrival of 235 sub-Saharan slaves at the Algarve port city Lagos: he “had no other pleasure than in thinking that these lost souls would now be saved.”⁴⁶ Slavery was a small price for the African to pay for his christianization. Spanish conquerors echoed the Portuguese in their justification for

⁴⁴ As early as the 14th century, the Franciscan Alvaro Pais, an assistant to Pope John XXII, wrote extensively on the theory of the just war in Portugal. See Russell-Wood, “Before Columbus,” 151, and “Iberian Expansion and the Issue of Black Slavery: Changing Portuguese Attitudes, 1440–1770,” *AHR*, 83 (1978), 23–28.

⁴⁵ Russell-Wood, “Iberian Expansion and the Issue of Black Slavery,” 27–28.

⁴⁶ Zurara, *Conquests and Discoveries of Henry the Navigator*, trans. Miall, 171.

enslaving African heathens. During the conquests of the Canary Islands from 1478 to 1496, Canarians accepted Christianity and renounced claims to sovereignty—yet the Canarians were still regarded as pagans and made slaves. As Felipe Fernández-Armesto has pointed out, precisely because they were pagans, “the natives were by nature or divine will subjects of the Castilian crown.”⁴⁷ The Catholic Church endorsed the extension of political power to those countries that conquered in the name of God. Religious acceptance meant political surrender for non-Christian nations. Despite acquiescing to the political and religious demands of the Iberians, people of color continued to be identified as “pagans” and “heathens,” and they were therefore conscripted to fill the demand for slaves.

In asserting a religious justification for slavery, the Portuguese and the Spanish avoided subjecting the practice to debate. That very few people grappled with the moral issue leads to several sobering conclusions about the evolution of black slavery. The Catholic Church either turned a blind eye toward Spanish and Portuguese enslavement of converted Africans, or it embraced a belief in the natural inferiority of peoples of color. A great deal of evidence points to the latter. Representatives of the church not only invoked the Hamitic curse when attempting to justify African slavery, but they also recognized that their Muslim enemies treated blacks as inferior Others. Therefore, blacks were viewed as inferior to the Muslim infidel and were accorded very few Christian rights by the Catholic Church.

In practice, the church tolerated the enslavement of blacks regardless of their religious beliefs, and neither the church nor the Catholic rulers were concerned with ensuring that Africans received the sacraments. Despite some success in converting the Kongolese royal court in the 1490s, no active steps were taken to ensure that slaves were baptized until 1514.⁴⁸ In addition, the bodies of dead African slaves were discarded without Christian burial. In

⁴⁷ The crown eventually had to intervene on behalf of enslaved Canarians who had converted to Christianity, ordering their emancipation; Fernández-Armesto, *Before Columbus: Exploration and Colonization from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, 1229–1492* (Philadelphia, 1987), 214, 237–38.

⁴⁸ Saunders, *Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal*, 40, 110. For the conversion of the Kongolese see John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1440–1680* (Cambridge, 1992), 257–62, and Wyatt MacGaffey, “Dialogues of the Deaf: Europeans on the Atlantic Coast of Africa,” in *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Stuart B. Schwartz (New York, 1994), 249–67. The conversion of the Kongolese court was limited in scope and was as much the result of political expediency as of religious transformation. The Portuguese were aiming to force the Africans to adopt religious and political changes that would suit Portuguese trading interests. Only the Kongolese elites were converted, and they refused to give up certain heathen customs like polygyny, thus continuing to be viewed by the Portuguese as infidels. Thornton stresses that, as a result of missionary efforts, African slaves were familiar with Christianity before they were transported to Europe and the Americas, thereby predisposing them to conversion. See Thornton, “On the Trail of Voodoo: African Christianity in Africa and the Americas,” *The Americas*, 44 (1988), 261–78. While this knowledge of Christianity may have played a role in the conversion process in the Americas, during the early years of the slave trade to Portugal, slaveowners appear to have been unconcerned with converting their chattels.

1515, King Manuel I commented on the growing number of dead Africans found in the streets of Lisbon. He seemed more concerned with sanitation than with Christian duty:

We are informed that the slaves that die in this city, brought from Guinea, like others, are not buried as well as they should be in the places they are thrown, and they are thrown on the ground in such a manner that they are discovered . . . and eaten by dogs; and a large number of these slaves are thrown in the dung heap . . . and still others in the fields of farms.⁴⁹

To remedy this mounting problem, Manuel suggested that mass burial sites be constructed where lime could be thrown on the corpses to speed decomposition. Thus, despite papal endorsement and a policy of conversion, the Catholic Church neglected the spiritual well-being of the Africans. Christianization of blacks was merely a convenient excuse for enslaving them.

By the fifteenth century, many Iberian Christians had internalized the racist attitudes of the Muslims and were applying them to the increasing flow of African slaves to their part of the world. The most compelling illustration appears in the chronicles of Zurara. When the Portuguese captured the North African city of Ceuta in 1415, they found “among those Moors . . . one large one with burned hair. . . . That Moor was dreadful and he had a body as black as a raven and he had very large white teeth, and his lips were very thick and revolting.”⁵⁰ That Zurara singled out one black Moor from the hundreds of Muslims who took part in the Battle of Ceuta is not particularly surprising. What is notable is the manner in which he describes this Moor. The “dreadful” animal characteristics of the Moor rendered him the ugliest and most fearful of all the Muslims of Africa.

Zurara described the first eleven sub-Saharan blacks brought to Portugal by Gonçalves as slaves “in accordance with ancient custom, which I believe to have been because of the curse which after the Deluge, Noah laid on his son Cain [Canaan] cursing him in this way: that his race would be subject to all the other races of the world.”⁵¹ The sons of Canaan had now become a race. As early as 1441, these distinctions were crystallized in the minds of Iberia’s Christians.

Iberians characterized the first Africans they encountered in pejoratives. Not only were blacks viewed as a race doomed to servility, but they were also classed as savages and idolaters. The chronicler Duarte Pacheco Pereira likened the physical appearance of several African peoples to that of dogs. They even acted like dogs. Rendering Africans as subhuman explained their cultural inferiority.⁵² Alvise da Cadamosto, a Venetian merchant-trader in

⁴⁹ Victor Ribeiro, *A Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa* (Lisbon, 1902), 182–83.

⁵⁰ Zurara, *Crónica da Tomada de Ceuta por El Rei D. João I*, ed. F. M. Esteves Pereira (Coimbra, Port., 1915), 204.

⁵¹ Zurara, *Chronique de Guinée* (Ifan-Dakar, 1960), 93–94.

⁵² Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, ed. and trans. George H. T. Kimble (London, 1937),

the hire of the Portuguese, described the blacks of Senegal as “great liars and cheats.”⁵³ The men and women of Budomel (fifty miles inland on the Senegal River) were “exceedingly lascivious”; “they eat on the ground, like animals, without manners.”⁵⁴ Hernando del Pulgar, appointed national historiographer of Spain in 1482 by Queen Isabella, wrote that Mina (on the coast of present-day Ghana) was a land of “savage people, black men, who were naked and lived in huts.”⁵⁵ In assessing the worldview of fifteenth-century Iberian Christians, the scholar of early Portuguese exploration Charles R. Boxer comments broadly that “hatred and intolerance . . . for alien creeds and races was the general rule; and the ecumenical spirit . . . was conspicuous by its absence.”⁵⁶

The Beginnings of the African Slave Trade

Lançarote de Freitas’s delivery of 235 Idzāgen and “blackamoor”⁵⁷ slaves from Guinea in 1444 was the first large cargo of black slaves to arrive on Portuguese soil. Zurara commented at length on the condition of the human cargoes. As the slaves disembarked,

it was truly a thing astonishing to behold; for among them were some wellnigh white, who were handsome and well made in body; others were black as Ethiopians, and so uncomely, as well as countenance as in body that those who were guarding them thought they beheld the creatures of the lower hemisphere. . . . Some held their heads bowed down and their faces were bathed with tears; others were groaning grievously, lifting their eyes to the heavens, fixing them upon the heights, and raising an outcry as though imploring the Father of Nature to succour them.⁵⁸

Though Zurara was troubled by what he saw, he was quick to juxtapose white beauty with black repulsiveness. His comments strongly suggest that a racial hierarchy determined his judgments. The concept of blood purity (*limpieza de sangre*) based on skin color appears to have been as strong a social and cultural indicator in Iberia as it later became in the Americas.⁵⁹

89, 98. Pereira also called blacks “evil,” “savage,” and “idolatrours”; *ibid.*, 93, 96–98, 107, 116, 127. Finally, he wrote that “it remains to know if they are . . . descended from Adam”; *ibid.*, 136.

⁵³ Cadamosto, *The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents* . . . , trans. and ed. G. R. Crone (London, 1937), 33.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 38, 41.

⁵⁵ Pulgar, “A Castilian Account of the Discovery of Mina, c. 1472,” in John William Blake, trans. and ed., *Europeans in West Africa 1450–1560*, 2 vols. (London, 1942), 1:205.

⁵⁶ Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415–1825* (New York, 1969), 3.

⁵⁷ Leslie B. Rout, Jr., *The African Experience in Spanish America, 1502 to the Present Day* (New York, 1976), 10.

⁵⁸ Zurara, *Conquests and Discoveries of Henry the Navigator*, trans. Miall, 169–70.

⁵⁹ In the Iberian context, *limpieza de sangre* was most commonly used in a religious sense.

Whiteness was associated with beauty and civility, while blackness equaled ugliness and servility.

By this time, blackness and the term *negro* “signified misfortune and sadness” in Iberian thought.⁶⁰ Zurara attributed black inferiority to paganism and bestiality:

having left the country in which they were dwelling to the perdition of their souls and bodies, they had now all things to the contrary. I say perdition of their souls, because they were pagans without the light or flame of the holy faith; and of their bodies, because they lived like beasts, without any of the customs of rational creatures, since they did not even know what were bread and wine, nor garments of cloth, nor life in the shelter of a house; and worse still was their ignorance, which deprived them of knowledge of good, and permitted them only a life of brutish idleness.⁶¹

Zurara employed a European measure of morality and civility, declaring that the West Africans “lived like beasts” in part because of their blackness. Equating the black body with bestiality necessarily implies condemnation. Zurara’s extended definition of the beast provides enormous insight into the cultural value judgments Iberians applied to black Africans. According to Zurara, slavery liberated Africans from their bestial condition, introducing them to Christianity and European culture.

After the spectacle described by Zurara, slaves were taken from Africa with increasing regularity. The moral justifications for the slave trade were taken for granted. Rising demand in Portugal, Spain, and later in the Atlantic islands meant increasing profits for merchants and traders, and settlements expanded along the African coast to support the trade. After several military defeats at the hands of coastal African nations, the Portuguese abandoned armed action in favor of peaceful trade as a means of obtaining slave labor.⁶² By 1448, the first permanent trading post was established on the island of Arguim, just off the coast of Mauritania. In 1466, Santiago in the Cape Verde Islands had become a center of trade with Upper Guinea from Senegal to Cape Palmas.⁶³ In 1482, the first slave fort, São Jorge da Mina, on the coast of present-day Ghana, allowed the Portuguese to extend the boundaries of their trade in human cargoes as far south as Kongo and Angola. The Portuguese commercial monopoly in West Africa acquired the blessing of the church with *Romanus pontifex* (1455) and gained Castilian

Christians viewed non-Christians and the converted (*conversos*) as culturally and socially inferior.

⁶⁰ Saunders, *Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal*, 167. See also *Crónica de Espanha de 1344*, vol. 2 (Lisbon, 1954), 174, 180, and *Crónica de Portugal 1419*, ed. A. Magalhães Basto under the title *Crónica de Cinco Reis de Portugal* (Porto, 1945), 63–64.

⁶¹ Zurara, *Conquests and Discoveries of Henry the Navigator*, trans. Miall, 173.

⁶² For a recent analysis of the Portuguese trade in Africa see Ivana Elbl, “Cross-Cultural Trade and Diplomacy: Portuguese Relations with West Africa, 1441–1521,” *Journal of World History*, 3 (1992), 165–204.

⁶³ Saunders, *Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal*, 5.

recognition with the signing of the Treaty of Alcáçovas (1479). Until that time, the Castilians challenged Portuguese claims with frequent raids on the West African coast. Under the treaty, Castile renounced all claims to West Africa in exchange for unchallenged rights to the Canary Islands. The Castilian-Portuguese rivalry thus came to an end.⁶⁴

During these formative years of the slave trade, the Portuguese were undoubtedly influenced by the attitudes of their Muslim trading partners along the Saharan littoral. Not an insignificant number of sub-Saharan Africans toiled in salt mines, worked in fields, and tended herds on the Saharan frontier.⁶⁵ The diminished status of black Africans must have been clear to the Portuguese in both the cultural and the religious practices of the Muslims. We have already discussed the myriad negative racial stereotypes that characterized Muslim thought regarding black pagans. In addition, light-skinned Muslims along the West African coast ignored their own religious canon by enslaving black Muslims.

In their attitudes toward blacks, the Portuguese followed where Muslim slavers had led. In 1392, the black king of Bornu (present-day northern Nigeria) wrote the sultan of Egypt protesting the pillage of his land and the enslavement of his people. Even though his people were free Muslims, the Arabs took his "people as merchandise" and sold them to slave dealers. In his appeal, the king noted that his nation was founded by an Arab, thereby proving his people's Muslim authenticity.⁶⁶ The problem of Arab Muslims illegally enslaving black Muslims persisted throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and even into the nineteenth century in West Africa, provoking commentary from Islamic jurists and historians alike.⁶⁷ That some of these captured Muslims were sent to Portugal via Arguim seems likely given the diversion of the trans-Saharan trade to Arguim by the 1450s. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the Portuguese saw the maltreatment of blacks (Muslim or pagan) by Muslims and acted similarly, even adopting the same racial justifications of their Muslim trading partners along the West African coast.

The crucial difference between Muslim and Portuguese variants of racial ideology was that Muslim racism was constantly subject to scrutiny by jurists and scholars. In addition, Islamic law prohibited the enslavement of other Muslims, including blacks. Despite recurrent enslavement of black adherents to the Islamic faith, there were numerous examples of black Islamic kingdoms in West Africa. The Muslims created a plethora of racist ideas, but it was the Iberians who, in conjunction with a rising demand for slave labor, turned these ideas into a coherent ideology.

The number of slaves transported from West Africa to Portugal between 1441 and 1500 is difficult to determine, but it was certainly large and steadily increasing. Zurara reported that from 1441 to 1448 about 924

⁶⁴ Russell-Wood, "Before Columbus," 137.

⁶⁵ Austen, "Trans-Saharan Slave Trade," 46.

⁶⁶ Al-Qalqashandi, *Subh al-A'sha*, vol. 8 (Cairo, 1313-1319/1895-1901), 116-17, quoted in Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, 53.

⁶⁷ Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, 57-58.

blacks were brought from Africa to Portugal.⁶⁸ With the decline in the flow of slaves from the Black Sea countries in the 1450s, the African trade became the principal supplier for Spain and Portugal. The Venetian merchant Cadamosto reported that 800–1,000 slaves passed through Portuguese ports each year.⁶⁹ By the turn of the sixteenth century, Pereira estimated that 200–400 slaves were brought annually from the Senegal River basin, and an annual total of 3,500 were shipped from Upper Guinea.⁷⁰ A.J.R. Russell-Wood conservatively estimates that Portugal took 80,000 slaves from sub-Saharan Africa in the fifty years before 1492.⁷¹ Other historians suggest that the Portuguese acquired as many as 150,000 slaves during this period.⁷² In many parts of Portugal, blacks quickly became the dominant source of slave labor.

The principal markets for Portugal's African slaves were Castile and later the Antilles. Despite the increasing numbers of slaves arriving in Portugal, slave prices rose owing primarily to foreign demand. As early as 1462, the trader Diogo Valarinho obtained permission to transport slaves from Portugal to Castile. Four years later, a Bohemian traveler, Vaclav Sasek, commented that the king of Portugal made more money selling slaves to foreigners "than from the taxes levied on the whole kingdom."⁷³ In 1472 and 1473, the Portuguese Cortes requested that black slaves not be exported because they performed the valuable work of clearing land and draining marshes.⁷⁴ There is no indication why whites, slave or free, could not have done this work. Presumably, such back-breaking tasks were reserved only for blacks. King Alfonso V, however, refused to restrict slave exports because of the enormous profits. The one stipulation he did make was that all slaves from Guinea had to pass through Portugal to be taxed before being sent to other countries. African slaves reached the cities and towns of Castile via overland routes as well as by sea, making the African presence felt across the whole peninsula.

Ports from Seville to Valencia saw a steady rise in the number of black slaves sent from Lisbon, especially after 1480. The numbers of black slaves recorded in Seville's official notarial registers between 1453 and 1489 seem

⁶⁸ Zurara, *Conquests and Discoveries of Henry the Navigator*, trans. Miall, 252. The number of slaves reported by Zurara has been challenged by some scholars. Even the various versions of his chronicles are inconsistent. I have chosen the lowest of the figures.

⁶⁹ Saunders, *Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal*, 19.

⁷⁰ Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, ed. Kimble, 78, 101.

⁷¹ Russell-Wood, "Before Columbus," 148.

⁷² Godinho suggests that between 140,000 and 150,000 heads were exported from Arguim and Sierra Leone between 1441 and 1505, in *Os Descobrimientos*, 161. Boxer suggests that 150,000 slaves were shipped to Portugal, in *Portuguese Seaborne Empire*, 31. José Ramos Tinharão estimates between 117,000 and 141,000 between 1441 and 1495, in *Os Negros em Portugal. Uma presença silenciosa* (Lisbon, 1988), 80. All these estimates substantially exceed Philip D. Curtin's estimate of 33,500 slaves imported into Europe between 1451 and 1500, in *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969), 115–16.

⁷³ Sasek, *Commentarius Brevis* (Olomouc, 1577), quoted in Saunders, *Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal*, 28.

⁷⁴ Saunders, *Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal*, 28.

understated: only thirty-one black slaves are noted for this twenty-seven-year span, whereas for the years 1483–1489, parish records indicate fifty.⁷⁵ During 1495 and 1496 alone, as many as 300 arrived in Seville. By the middle of the next century, observers compared the city to a giant chessboard with equal numbers of black and white chessmen.⁷⁶ The figures for Valencia are more reliable owing to the survival of tax registers recording slave sales in the city. Before 1489, perhaps no more than fifty slaves per year were shipped from Lisbon to Valencia. Recognizing the strength of the market, merchants sent an average of 233 per year from 1489 to 1497.⁷⁷ As the numbers continued to mount, the white Iberian response to the large influx of blacks showed the institutional depth of racism.

Slave Life

Though blacks in Iberia enjoyed a certain degree of mobility within the slave setting, they were still regarded as culturally inferior and were subject to the whims of the white ruling class. A significant number was employed in a domestic capacity. These slaves played a limited economic role, symbolizing instead the prestige and wealth of the slaveholder. The most arduous work was reserved for blacks. In Portugal, they cleared land and dug drainage ditches. In Seville, they cleared mule droppings from the streets and plazas.⁷⁸ In Cadiz in 1486, fifty-two black slaves sweated in a salt mine. In other parts of Andalusia, blacks toiled in soap factories and transported barrels of water across great distances by mule.⁷⁹ Free black women worked as washerwomen and prostitutes.

Portuguese and Castilian law recognized slaves as people with legal rights. The lives of black slaves were subject to the same protection as those of white noblemen. The murder of a slave by anyone, including his or her master, was punishable by death. There is no evidence to suggest that anyone was ever in fact executed for killing a slave. Murderers of blacks or of lower-class whites often were able to strike deals with the crown, substituting military service or monetary compensation or both for capital punishment.⁸⁰ Though slaves had legal rights, their civil status was severely circumscribed. Slaves were not considered legal inhabitants of the towns where they lived. They could not testify in court except under exceptional circumstances, and then only if called by a judge. They had no property rights; the master owned the slave and all of the slave's possessions.

⁷⁵ Alfonso Franco Silva, *La esclavitud en Sevilla y su tierra a fines de la edad media* (Seville, 1980), 150.

⁷⁶ Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, "La esclavitud en Castilla durante la Edad Moderna," *Estudios de Historia Social de España*, 2 (1952), 377–78.

⁷⁷ A. Teixeira da Mota, *Alguns Aspectos da Colonização e do Comércio Marítimo dos Portugueses na África Ocidental nos Séculos XV e XVI* (Lisbon, 1976), 8–9.

⁷⁸ Franco Silva, *La esclavitud en Sevilla*, 198.

⁷⁹ Franco Silva, *La Esclavitud en Andalucía 1450–1550* (Granada, 1992), 99–101.

⁸⁰ Saunders, *Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal*, 115–16.

The social lives of slaves were also severely restricted, especially after blacks began to dominate the servile population. Seville's slaves frequented the taverns and inns of the city, at times becoming drunk and disorderly. The heavy consumption of alcohol at these and other social gatherings led municipal officials to limit the number of slaves who could assemble in one place and sometimes to prohibit slave gatherings altogether.⁸¹ In the streets of Seville, whites openly insulted blacks with "the customary sidewalk jeer [*estornudo*]." ⁸² By the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella in the 1470s, the city's black population had grown so large that the crown elected "to place them under greater royal supervision and control."⁸³ The Iberians' reaction to the black presence—from the average worker on the street to the king and queen—was one that can only be characterized as racist.

Racism without Race

Most theorists agree that there is scant evidence of a well-developed and articulated racist ideology in fifteenth-century Christian society in Iberia and certainly not in the Muslim societies it supplanted. The classification of human beings according to race was not then common. Rather, the treatment of black Africans from the Middle Ages to the early modern period appears to be racism without race. The classification of human beings based on pseudoscientific claims during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave greater legitimacy to racism, but the science of race merely reinforced notions of biology that had been evolving for centuries. Orlando Patterson has commented that "the absence of an articulated doctrine of racial superiority does not necessarily imply behavioral tolerance in the relations between peoples of somatically different groups."⁸⁴ This was true in Iberia. Even though a fully developed ideology of race was not articulated, fifteenth-century white Iberians made distinctions among peoples based on skin color and attributed less worth to human beings who had black or brown skins.

The conquest of the Americas and the classification of the indigenous peoples according to race may be understood as part of a process that began with the expulsion of the Muslims from Granada and continued with the Iberian invasions of the Atlantic islands and Africa. Almost immediately on his arrival in the Caribbean, Columbus commented on the color of the peoples he encountered—"the color of Canarians, neither black nor white."⁸⁵ This reference to the Guanches of the Canary Islands establishes a striking parallel between the experiences of Atlantic African peoples and the expectations that would be imposed on those newly encountered "*indios*." Iberians had long decided that among those who were naturally suited for slavery

⁸¹ Ruth Pike, *Aristocrats and Traders: Sevillian Society in the Sixteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1972), 181; Franco Silva, *Esclavitud en Sevilla*, 216.

⁸² Pike, *Aristocrats and Traders*, 187–88.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁸⁴ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, 1982), 420.

⁸⁵ Christopher Columbus, *Diario de a bordo*, ed. Luis Arranz (Madrid, 1985), 91.

were individuals who were “the color of Canarians,” so it comes as no surprise that in the same journal entry Columbus wrote that the natives would make “good servants.”⁸⁶ Columbian discourse was explicit. There were three racial possibilities—white, black, and the color of Canarians. For people of any color but white, life’s possibilities were severely circumscribed. By the time of the Columbian encounter, race had evolved into an independent and deeply etched element of the Iberian consciousness, not simply a manifestation of more fundamental social and cultural relationships. Race, and especially skin color, defined the contours of power relationships. As a result of centuries of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish inscription in the social order, racial stratification attained its own independent logic, deeply woven into the social and cultural fabric of fifteenth-century Iberia. The legacy of Iberian racism would endure in the Americas.⁸⁷

Iberian racism was a necessary precondition for the system of human bondage that would develop in the Americas during the sixteenth century and beyond. The African slave trade was only in its infancy when the first blacks were brought to Hispaniola in 1502, but the racial attitudes of the Spanish were already firmly fixed. Aversion to black Africans permitted their exploitation in ways the colonists never considered for white slaves or servants. The virulence of racism increased as economic imperatives fueled Africans’ debasement, but the origins of racism preceded the emergence of capitalism by centuries. Biological assumptions that were familiar to a nineteenth-century Cuban slaveowner would have been recognizable to his fifteenth-century Spanish counterpart. The rhetoric of debasement knew no national or chronological boundaries. The racist attitudes that existed in tenth-century Andalusia are in many respects prominent in the American mind today, a stark expression of their longevity, a continuing reminder of the civilized West’s failures, and a stain on its conscience.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ I have chosen to end with the encounter of Americans and Europeans because it seems an appropriate watershed. Racial discourse in the early colonial period of Latin America remains a ripe topic, one that I intend to explore further.