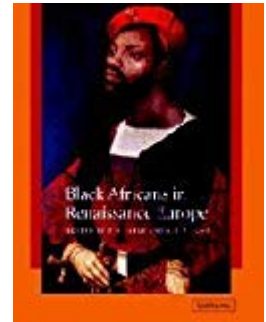


Tom Earle, Kate J. P. Lowe. *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 417 S. \$110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-81582-6.



Reviewed by Allison Blakely

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 2007)

This rich and engaging volume of essays is remarkable for both its breadth and depth of treatment of a subject too long neglected, despite the fact that, as these scholars demonstrate, related sources have always been available. This works publication at this historical moment is especially timely as a vital supplement to the profusion of books and articles on Blacks in modern Europe that have appeared over the past two decades. Moreover, it will help to place the current, unprecedented level of black population in Europe in needed historical perspective. Among the book's strengths is the fact that the authors of its sixteen essays are specialists in a range of disciplines, including history, literature, art history, and anthropology. Their essays are grouped into four parts under the following headings: Conceptualising Black Africans; Real and Symbolic Black Africans at Court; The Practicalities of Enslavement and Emancipation; and Black Africans with European Identities and Profiles.

Kate Lowe begins with a helpful overview, and discussion of this research's challenges such as terminology. For example, the definition of

"Black" is complicated by a vast array of terms found in the sources, such as "mulatto," "black," "Ethiopian," "African," "moro," "nero," "negro," "negre," "preto," and "indiani." This compounds the already difficult task of counting the black population. She also admits the artificiality of the concepts "Black African" and "Renaissance Europe;" but both are necessary devices for framing study of historical developments that were quite real. Among the important findings of these authors is that Europeans were highly ignorant about Africa, which was one contributing factor to the magnification of the significance of skin color as an identifying characteristic. On the question of racism, those who treat that in the volume confirm that there was definitely discrimination and differentiation based upon color and origins (including legalized inferiority and cultural denigration); but the "racism" as defined in the later era of scientific racism, by definition, could not be present. Nevertheless, England's Queen Elizabeth I's 1601 proclamation aimed at expelling all Blacks ('Blackmoores', 'Blacamoores' and 'Negroes') from England, and introduction of the concept of 'purity of blood' ("impieza de sangre") in

the Iberian peninsula in the sixteenth century were just codification of longstanding attitudes (p. 9). Nevertheless, even after the onset of the predominant use of Black Africans as slaves and the coalescence of a European concept of civilization some Blacks were able to assimilate sufficiently to be made exceptions to a high degree and considered 'honorary' Europeans with black skins. At the same time, even freed Blacks found it difficult to remain free because of the strong association of blackness with slavery in popular attitudes, thus contributing to the association of Blacks with slavery becoming one of the first main stereotypes to develop in Europe proper. As early as the 16th century the stereotype of the happy-go-lucky, always-laughing black slave emerged, as well as the belief that Africans were more prone to drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, and criminality. Contrary to the stereotypes, records also show many free, working in such occupations as musicians, soldiers, and sailors; and the various European elites occasionally included Africans who were nobles, government officials, intellectuals, priests, and even saints. These studies confirm the long established fact that the Black population in Europe during these centuries reached its highest levels in the Iberian Peninsula in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, due in part to labor shortages in the wake of the bubonic plague. The black population of Lisbon numbered as high as 10% in the early sixteenth century.

Among the several fascinating accounts in this volume, many readers will likely find the treatment of some of the most prestigious individuals of special interest. The best known such figure is Juan Latino, treated here by Baltasar Fra-Molinero in "Juan Latino and his racial difference" (326-44). Fra-Molinero characterizes him as a rare instance of a black person of the time writing at all, and in this case in Latin, the language of the power elite. He concludes that Latino through this work deliberately sought to distinguish himself from other black Africans and slaves, stand apart from African Muslims as a black Christian

at a time when Islam had been declared the enemy, and enhance the dignity of all black Africans through their close association with the Biblical Ethiopia. The further claim that "...he was the first black intellectual in Europe to construct a discourse of black pride" (344) may be subject to debate. John Brackett's contribution, "Race and rulership: Alessandro de' Medici, first Medici duke of Florence, 1529-1537" (303-25), treats a lesser-known intriguing figure whose African ancestry is still subject to some debate among experts, but was given the nick-name "The Moor" by contemporaries; and documents suggest he was most likely the son of either Lorenzo de Medici or Pope Clement VII. He was unexpectedly made Duke of Florence at the age of nineteen in 1529, and murdered in 1537 at the age of 26 at the behest of his cousin Lorenzino de Medici. Another colorful historical figure not widely known, one illustrating a role of Blacks in the medieval Church is Benedetto il moro (c. 1524-89), who is highlighted in Nelson Minnich's essay, "The Catholic Church and the pastoral care of black Africans in Renaissance Italy" (280-300). Born in Sicily of Christian parents, not formally educated, Benedetto entered a Franciscan congregation of hermits at the age of 20; for most of his life worked in the kitchen and sweeping the floors of the monastery of S. Maria di Gesù near Palermo; and earned a reputation for such exceptional humility and asceticism that it became the stuff of legend. His frequent flagellations, constant fasting on bread and water and vegetables, long nightly vigils and prayer were said to be so effective as to cause his body to levitate and become luminous while he prayed. Powers of clairvoyance, cures of fatal illnesses, and even resuscitation of the dead were attributed to him, though at times he also had to endure racial insults even from fellow monks. He was eventually formally canonized in 1743 and in 1807.

This is an exceptionally rich anthology, well written, handsomely illustrated, and containing

much of value for both specialists and a more general public.

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Citation: Allison Blakely. Review of Earle, Tom; Lowe, Kate J. P. *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. September, 2007.

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