

1-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Wolf, Kenneth Baxter. "The `Moors' of West Africa and the beginnings of the Portuguese slave trade." *Journal of Medieval & Renaissance Studies* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 449.

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The "Moors" of West Africa and the beginnings of the Portuguese slave trade

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The Europeans involved in the enslavement of West Africans were embedded in a cultural framework within which they "made sense" of their actions. Insofar as historians have attended to this framework, the focus has been on the reconstruction of contemporary European images of Black Africans and ideals about "natural slavery" that relied either on Aristotelian tenets about varying degrees of rationality among the peoples of the world or on biblical curses that condemned entire nations to servitude. While there is no doubt that the idea of natural slavery ultimately came to dominate this interpretative matrix, the very earliest European expeditions to the West African coast—that is, those of the Portuguese in the 1430s and 1440s—unfolded within a considerably wider set of cultural presuppositions. From the point of view of the captains of these expeditions, the captives that they brought back to Portugal were slaves not by nature but by circumstance. They were prisoners of war. Even when the concept of natural slavery *was* articulated for the first time in the context of West Africa, it was expressed within the broad cultural framework of slavery as a function of warfare. It is in my intention here to illustrate this point by considering the earliest Portuguese account of slaving expeditions to West Africa.

There are hints of Portuguese interest in Africa as early as the fourteenth century. The decision of King Dinis to make the Genoese commander Emmanuele Pessagno admiral of the new Portuguese fleet in 1317 may well have reflected royal interest in recent Genoese activities on the Moroccan coast. Moreover, the king's establishment of a new military order—the Order of Christ (1319)—with the express purpose of advancing the crusade against Islam, would seem, in light of the absence of a Portuguese-Muslim frontier (since the conquest of the Algarve in the mid thirteenth century), to indicate that Dinis intended

to carry the struggle to Africa.¹ But the real turning point came a century later during the reign of João I, with the conquest of the Moroccan city of Ceuta.²

One of the more notable participants in this campaign was, significantly enough, João's third son, Henrique, adopted by the English-speaking world as Henry the Navigator.³ Knighted at age nineteen on the beach of Ceuta, Prince Henry returned to Portugal and ultimately assumed the leadership of the Order of Christ, a position that provided him with both the resources and presumably the rationale for pursuing Portuguese interests on the west coast of Africa. While on an expedition to the Canary Islands in 1434, Henry's squire Gil Eanes sailed south of Cape Bojador, a point of land adjacent to the islands that had come to be regarded by some Europeans at that time as the southern limit of habitable territory in Africa.⁴ Eanes's achievement encouraged Henry to send ship after ship down the coast of Africa. By 1448, in fact, some 51 Portuguese vessels had passed Bojador, making their way as far south as Cape Verde.⁵ Most of them came back to Portugal with African slaves.

The participants in these early expeditions left no written accounts

1. Bailey W. Diffie and George D. Winius, *Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415-1580: Europe and the World in the Ages of Expansion*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 1:26. For a general treatment of the economics of the early Portuguese expansion, see Vitorino de Magalhães Godinho, *A Economia dos descobrimentos Henriquinos* (Lisbon: Livraria Sa da Costa, 1962).

2. Diffie and Winius, *Foundations*, 51-55.

3. Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *Crónica dos feitos de Guiné*, ed. António J. Dias Dinis (Lisbon: Divisão de Publicações e Biblioteca, 1949), chap. 3, pp. 15-16; chap. 5, pp. 23-25. For an English translation, see *The Chronicle of the Conquest and the Discovery of Guinéa*, trans. Charles Raymond Beazley and Edgar Prestage, 2 vols., Hakluyt Society, vol. 100 (New York: Hakluyt Society, 1899), 11, 15-17. Quotations in this article are based on Beazley's translations, which are generally very good, but modified in accordance with modern usage.

4. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 8, p. 48; *Chronicle*, 31.

5. There is some question as to the extent of Henry's involvement in all of this. His brother Pedro, who was later officially discredited as a traitor, may have had a more important role in sponsoring these voyages. See P. E. Russell, *Prince Henry the Navigator: The Rise and Fall of a Culture Hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), and Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Before Columbus: Exploration and Colonization from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, 1229-1492* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 185-90. For a concise overview of Henry's life, see Ivana Elbl, "Man of His Time (and Peers): A New Look at Henry the Navigator," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 28 (1991): 73-89.

For an up-to-date study of Portuguese-West African contact in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, see Ivana Elbl, "Cross-Cultural Trade and Diplomacy: Portuguese Relations with West Africa, 1441-1521," *Journal of World History* 3 (1992): 165-204.

of their experiences.⁶ If their reports to Henry were committed to writing, none of them has survived. But we do have a contemporary history of these early expeditions written by the royal archivist and chronicler, Gomes Eanes de Zurara. Zurara began his career as a historian in the late 1440s, working under the royal archivist and chronicler, Fernão Lopes (whom Zurara himself would succeed in 1454). Lopes, appointed to his post by João I (1385–1433) in 1418, had been commissioned by the king's son and successor Duarte (1433–38) to write a history of the Portuguese kings up through João, but had only managed to reach the year 1411. Zurara's first task as his assistant was to complete the account of João's reign. His continuation, however, focused almost exclusively on the conquest of Ceuta (1415) and assumed an independent literary identity as the *Crónica de tomada de Ceuta*.⁷ Three years after completing it, in 1449, Zurara was commissioned by King Afonso to write a history of the expeditions down the coast of Africa that had been sponsored by his uncle, Prince Henry (d. 1460). Zurara completed the *Crónica dos feitos de Guiné* in 1453.⁸

Afonso's patronage assures us that the principal audience that Zurara had in mind as he wrote was the king. Indeed, modern historians of Portugal have speculated, on the basis of Zurara's reliance on an earlier but no longer extant account of the expeditions authored by one Afonso Cerveira, that Afonso specifically assigned Zurara the task of rewriting Cerveira's history, which, it is hypothesized, had given too

6. The only early account from an actual participant is the *De Prima Inventione Guineae* recorded by Martim Behaim and later translated by Valentim Fernandes, but based on the oral account of Diogo Gomes. Gomes was, however, in his eighties when, sometimes after 1482, he collaborated with Behaim. For the Latin edition and a French translation, see T. Monod, R. Mauny, and G. Duval, eds., *De la première decouverte de la Guinée*, Centro de Estudos de Guiné Portuguesa, 21 (Bissau: n.p., 1959). For the Portuguese version, see *As Viagens dos Descobrimentos*, ed. José Manuel Garcia (Lisbon: Editorial Presença, 1983), 27–54. For a partial English translation, see *The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents on Western Africa in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century*, trans. G. R. Crone, Hakluyt Society, ser. 2, vol. 80 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1937): xxiv–xxvii and 91–102. For an overview of the sources for early Portuguese expansion, see Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, ed., *Documentos sobre a expansão portuguesa* (Lisbon: Editorial "Gleba," 1943–56).

7. Zurara, *Crónica da tomada de Ceuta por el Rei D. João I*, ed. Francisco María Steves Pereira (Lisbon: Academia das Sciencias de Lisboa, 1915).

8. For a more complete biography, see A. J. Dias Dinis, *Vida e Obras de Gomes Eanes de Zurara* (Lisbon: Divisão de Publicações e Biblioteca, 1949). Rita Costa Gomes's entry in Estampa's forthcoming dictionary of medieval Portuguese literature provides a brief, up-to-date account. My thanks to Dr. Costa for sharing a draft of this entry with me. A concise account of Zurara's life in English can be found in Edgar Prestage, *The Chronicles of Fernão Lopes and Gomes de Zurara* (Watford: Voss and Michael, 1928), 61–67.

much credit to the king's uncle and erstwhile political rival, Pedro.⁹ Whether or not these were the actual circumstances behind the authorship of the *Crónica dos feitos de Guiné*, Afonso showed signs of being particularly sensitive to the use of history as a bulwark of royal authority. The fact that Zurara's continuation of Lopes's history of João's reign focused so narrowly on his conquest of Ceuta probably reflected Afonso's desire to promote Portuguese intervention in Morocco. Indeed Zurara's later historical projects appear to have been coordinated with the king's campaigns in Morocco. In the same year (1458) that the king commissioned his chronicler to write a chivalric history of Portuguese Ceuta under the governorship of Pedro de Menezes (1415-37), Afonso launched the campaign that secured control of Alcacer Ceguer. And it was in the wake of his second Moroccan expedition in 1464 that Afonso ordered Zurara to write a similar history praising the heroic efforts of Pedro's son Duarte de Menezes, the late governor of Alcacer Ceguer.¹⁰

While Zurara was in Morocco collecting data for this chronicle (1467), he received a letter from the king, which contained the following encomium of historians:

It is not without reason that men of your profession should be prized and honored, for next after the princes and captains who achieve deeds worth remembering, they that record them, when those are dead, deserve much praise. . . . What would have become of the deeds of Rome if Livy had not written them? What of Alexander's without a Quintus Curtius, of those of Troy without a Homer, of Caesar's without a Lucan?¹¹

Although hardly original to Afonso, this sentiment would appear in his case to have been heartfelt. He knew that his aspirations to imperial glory were dependent not only on his military success in Africa, but also on the literary skills of his chronicler.¹²

9. See, for instance, Duarte Leite, *Acerca da "Crónica dos feitos de Guiné"* (Lisbon: Livraria Bertrand, 1941).

10. *Crónica do Conde D. Pedro de Meneses* (written 1452-53), in *Collecção de Livros Inéditos de Historia Portugueza* (Lisbon: Officina da mesma Academia, 1792), 2:213-635. *Crónica do Conde D. Duarte de Meneses* (written 1464-67/68), ed. Larry King (Lisbon: Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 1978). Zurara spent a year in Portuguese Morocco in 1467-68, collecting information for the latter of these two histories.

11. Quoted by Prestage in *Chronicles*, 67.

12. It should also be noted that Afonso was himself a highly literate man—the author, in fact, of two books on warfare and astronomy. See Prestage, *Chronicles*.

We cannot say for certain how faithfully the *Crónica dos feitos de Guiné* reproduced the order of events on the beaches of West Africa. We do know that Zurara made use of written sources when preparing his account. He refers on three separate occasions to Cerveira's earlier work, and modern efforts have been made to reconstruct it as well as the supposed official records of the voyages to which Zurara, as archivist, would have had access.¹³ We assume that he relied on oral sources as well, since many of the participants in the early expeditions would still have been alive at the time he was writing, and because he specifically refers to his use of interviews to inform another of his histories.¹⁴ In any case, there was ample room for Zurara to modify the actual order and magnitude of the events through exaggeration, understatement, invention, or neglect.

But if the accuracy of this text as a chronicle of events is open to debate, its significance as an expression of a cultural milieu is not. For Zurara's chronicle, insofar as it is the product of a mid-fifteenth-century Portuguese mind, constitutes a textual artifact of the mid-fifteenth-century Portuguese culture which gave shape to that mind. The specific contours of the work that Zurara produced cannot but reflect something of the realm of possibilities available to a man living at his time, in his place, under his circumstances. The important point for our purposes is, therefore, not the extent to which Zurara took liberties with "the facts," but the degree to which the cultural framework within which he wrote was the same as that within which the captains of the early slaving expeditions encountered the peoples of West Africa.

There is every reason to believe that they were, in fact, one and the same. We know that Zurara was reared in the royal court. The best

13. The only Portuguese source that Zurara cites is the lost work by one Afonso Cerveira. The fact that Zurara cited Cerveira on three separate occasions (chaps. 32, 56, 83) has led Duarte Leite and most current Portuguese historians to posit heavy reliance in the lost work, in fact suggesting that the *Crónica de Guiné* represents a "fusion" of a "private chronicle" of Henry and an account of the "deeds" in Guinéa. (Gomes, op. cit.). See, for instance, Vitorino de Magalhães Godinho, *Mito e Mercadoria: Utopia e pratica de navegar* (Lisbon: Difusão Editorial, 1990). The absence of Cerveira's work makes the discussion of the extent of Zurara's borrowing rather academic and makes the *Crónica de Guiné* "ground zero" for any study about the "myth of Henry" and the romanticization of the Portuguese exploits in West Africa. Leite has also attempted to reconstruct the supposed secret records that informed Zurara's account. Leite, *Acerca da "Crónica dos feitos de Guinéa,"* 191-233. See also Elbl, "Cross-Cultural Trade," 188 (and note 121).

14. *Crónica do Conde D. Duarte de Meneses.*

estimates as to the year of his birth place it between 1410 and 1420, making him old enough to remember the voyages that he wrote about (which covered the fourteen-year period from 1434 to 1448) and, more importantly, to have known and interacted with the men who led them. For virtually all of the captains of these voyages were, like Zurara, members of the royal court. We have already met Gil Eanes, one of Henry's squires. Afonso Gonçalves Baldaya, the commander of the second voyage, was the prince's cupbearer. Antão Gonçalves, who captained the third, was Henry's chamberlain. And all of them are treated in the most glowing terms in the *Crónica dos feitos de Guiné* as paradigms of chivalry. It is this intimate court connection between the king Afonso who patronized the history, Zurara who wrote it, the aging Henry (d. 1460) who inspired it, and the royal servants who fill its pages, which allows us to treat Zurara's work, for all intents and purposes, as an expression of the same interpretative structure as that which framed the actions of the Portuguese captains on the coast of Africa.¹⁵

Perhaps the most striking thing about the *Crónica dos feitos de Guiné*, at least to the modern reader, is the extent to which it depicts the expeditions in light of the struggle against Islam. Zurara presented them as if they were simply a new chapter in a long history that had begun with the *reconquista* in Spain but which had been transferred to the other side of the straits in 1415 with the *conquista* of Ceuta. This made perfect sense to Zurara and his courtly audience. After all, one of Prince Henry's primary motives in sponsoring the expeditions was, according to Zurara, to reconnoiter the African coast. Henry wanted to know how far to the south the "power of the Moors in that land of Africa" actually extended.¹⁶ Moreover, Zurara had just finished his history of the conquest of Ceuta, and so could easily have regarded his new project as a sequel to the old.

This connection between the struggle against Islam and the expeditions down the coast of Africa gave Zurara access to a stockpile of familiar motifs found in popular histories and romances glorifying the valor of past Christian champions in the struggle with the Moors—a literature that was, in fact, enjoying a great resurgence

15. Elbl has observed, "Even if these narratives were actually based on eye-witness reports, they still would be bound to misconstrue both the negotiations and the reality of the Portuguese presence in West Africa. The Portuguese and Africans saw each other through the prism of very different ideas" ("Cross-Cultural Trade," 189).

16. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 7, p. 44; *Chronicle*, 28.

all over Europe at the very time that Zurara was writing.¹⁷ Zurara borrowed freely from this genre, infusing his *Crónica dos feitos de Guiné* with chivalric language, motifs, and storylines. Zurara's application of chivalric, reconquista-style language and patterns to these expeditions—which we assume, on the basis of the connections described above, amounted to a "loftier" literary expression of language and patterns applied by the sea-captains themselves—had, I will argue, a profound effect on the representation of the peoples of West Africa below Cape Bojador. In a word—admittedly not a very elegant one—these peoples found themselves "Mooricized" by the Portuguese sea-captains who met them on the beach as well as by Zurara, who transformed their reports into a full-blown history.¹⁸ That is, the West Africans, about whom the Portuguese were hitherto wholly ignorant, were made eminently familiar by being conflated with those "Moors" whom the Portuguese nobility "knew" all too well. Let us now turn to Zurara's *Crónica dos feitos de Guiné* and see something of this process at work.

Gil Eanes's successful venture beyond Bojador in 1434 encouraged Henry to send him back shortly thereafter, this time in the company of Henry's cupbearer, Afonso Gonçalves Baldaya.¹⁰ Together they sailed "fifty leagues beyond the Cape, where they found the land without dwellings, but with footprints of men and camels."²⁰ Back in Portugal, Henry interpreted this as a sign of a nearby settlement or of a local trade route: "For since they are people, it is necessary that they

17. Among the scholars whom Afonso patronized in his court were those dedicated to translating chivalric romances into Portuguese (Prestage, *Chronicles*, 61-62). For a brief discussion of this chivalric mentality and its relationship to the Portuguese expeditions, see Fernández-Armesto, *Before Columbus*, 11, 185-87, 221-22.

18. A. C. de C. M. Saunders has argued that it was in the interests of the Portuguese to depict their actions in West Africa as a conquest of Muslim territory so as to legitimate, in the eyes of the papacy, their claim to exclusive trade in the region. "The Depiction of Trade as War as a Reflection of Portuguese Ideology and Diplomatic Strategy in West Africa, 1441-1556," *Canadian Journal of History* 17 (1982): 219-34.

19. For a modern study of the precise locations of the earliest Portuguese landfalls, see Manuel Coelho Baptista de Luna, "O primeiro contacto entre os portugueses e os pretos da Guiné," in *Congresso comemorativo do quinto centenário do descobrimento da Guiné* (Lisbon: Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa, 1946), 2:10-16.

20. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 9, p. 56; *Chronicle*, 34. Camels were introduced into western Africa in the fourth century, making it possible to establish the overland trade routes that brought gold from the western Sudan to the Mediterranean littoral. J. Spenser Trimingham, *A History of Islam in West Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 15.

depend on things from the sea . . . no matter how bestial they may be.”²¹ He sent Afonso Gonçalves out again in 1436, this time with orders to find and bring back one of the men responsible for the footprints so that he might be questioned about the region. Gonçalves came to an inlet—optimistically dubbed Rio d’Ouro (River of Gold)²²—where he anchored and arranged for two youths on horseback to be transported to the shore to reconnoiter the area. So as not to tire the horses, the scouts were to be armed only with lances and swords, deemed sufficient to capture a single man should they encounter one. After some time the two scouts came upon a group of nineteen men armed only with light spears.

This is the earliest recorded encounter between the Portuguese and the people of Africa south of Bojador. Not surprisingly, given the Portuguese intention to capture one of them, it was not a peaceful one. According to Zurara, “as soon as the [two] youths saw [the nineteen men], they went after them with great courage,” apparently emboldened by their assessment of the local weaponry.²³ The nineteen took refuge in nearby rocky terrain and held off the Portuguese until nightfall when the scouts decided it was time to return to the ship. For their troubles, they had succeeded only in wounding one of the nineteen after one of the Portuguese youths was himself hit by a spear in the foot.

Zurara’s version of this first encounter, true to the thrust of his history as a whole, is steeped in the language of the romances. He is far more concerned with demonstrating the chivalric bravery of the Portuguese youths than he is with recording ethnographic data. Indeed, aside from their number and gender, all the *Crónica* tells us about the people whom the scouts encountered is that they were armed with spears. Any curiosity or surprise that the Portuguese might have experienced is glossed over by Zurara; or, more accurately, it is projected onto the nineteen Africans. “What thoughts would have been in the minds of those men upon seeing such a novelty, namely, two such daring youths, of color and features so foreign to them; what could they think had brought them there, on horseback, with lances and swords, arms that some of them had never seen.” Even here Zurara is

21. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 10, p. 57; *Chronicle*, 35.

22. One of the principal motives behind Portuguese interest in West Africa—and the Canaries—was the desire to tap into the trans-Saharan gold traffic. Fernández-Armesto, *Before Columbus*, 140–48, 189–92.

23. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 10, p. 59; *Chronicle*, 36.

not as interested in describing the Africans *per se* as in forestalling any suspicions on the part of the reader that the nineteen poorly armed men did not constitute a worthy opponent for the exercise of knightly valor: "Certainly I feel that their hearts would not have been so faint, and they would have displayed greater bravery against our men, had it not been for the shock that came from the novelty of the thing."²⁴

Zurara went on to relate how, after the two youths had returned to the ship and reported to Afonso Gonçalves, the captain himself made for the site of the altercation. Much to his disappointment, he found only an empty camp and, after confiscating the "poor belongings" that he found there, he reversed his course and headed for the open sea. The *Crónica's* description of Gonçalves's final act before leaving the area is, I think, significant.

He saw on a bank at the entrance of the river a great multitude of sea lions, which according to the estimate of some numbered about 5,000, and he caused his men to kill as many as they could, and with their skins he loaded his ship—for, either because they were easy to kill, or because our men were inclined toward such an action (*ou por o engenho daquelles seer auto pera tal feito*), they made among those sea lions a very great slaughter.²⁵

Presumably this hunt was partly motivated by the desire to secure something of value that would offset the cost of the expedition. But in Zurara's prose (and presumably in the minds of the Portuguese crew as well) such economic motives are immersed in the language of chivalry as the hunt is transformed into a surrogate battle. The Portuguese had come to Africa to demonstrate their valor and, for lack of an obliging human opponent, they would vent their frustration on the unfortunate animals.

Initially Zurara made no effort to identify, in either ethnic or religious terms, those whom the scouts had encountered. But later, when recounting Gonçalves's futile search for the nineteen men, Zurara referred to them as *Mouros*.²⁶ "Moor" is a complicated term.²⁷ It comes

24. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 10, p. 59; *Chronicle*, 36–37.

25. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 10, pp. 60–61; *Chronicle*, 37.

26. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 10, p. 60; *Chronicle*, 37.

27. For the most specific treatment, see Neville Barbour, "The Significance of the Word *Maurus*, with Its Derivatives *Moro* and *Moor*, and of the Other Terms Used by Medieval Writers in Latin to Describe the Inhabitants of Muslim Spain," *Actas de IV Congresso de Estudos Arabes e Islamicos* (Coimbra, 1968) (Leiden: Brill, 1971).

from the Latin *maurus*, which in Roman times simply referred to the inhabitants of the province of Mauretania, that is, modern-day Algeria and northeastern Morocco, otherwise known as the Maghrib. In the seventh century, Isidore of Seville derived *maurus* from the Greek *mauros* for "black," an early instance of what would become a common medieval European association between *mauri* and dark skin.

However, as a result of the invasions and immigration that, beginning in 711, brought significant numbers of Moroccans across the straits and into Spain, the term *maurus* (and subsequently its romance derivatives, *moro* and *mouro*) became more complex. First of all, there was nothing ethnically uniform about the invaders. There were the Berbers, the indigenous peoples of the Moroccan highlands. Then there were the Arabs who had recently conquered and begun to settle in the Maghrib.²⁸ Eighth-century Latin sources from Spain were careful to distinguish between *mauri* and *arabes*,²⁹ but before long the terms became synonymous, and ultimately, by the later Middle Ages, "Moor" had all but eclipsed "Arab" in vernacular usage. At roughly the same time a new ethnic wrinkle was added. Due to the growing percentage of sub-Saharan blacks among the slave population in Morocco and Granada, the category of "Moor" was stretched to accommodate "black Moors."

Second, after 711 the term "Moor" was saddled with religious connotations, stemming from the simple fact that from 711 on, the Moroccans (and Arabs) who came to Spain as conquerors and immigrants were Muslims. It was, of course, specifically this religious component of "Moorness" that was used to justify Ibero-Christian hostility toward the Moors in the struggle for peninsular hegemony. As a result of crusade propaganda, the Moors came to be regarded as the quintessential "enemies of the faith."

Presumably it was skin color and geographical contiguity that first suggested the inclusion of the peoples of Rio d'Ouro in a category—the category of "Moor"—that was commonly used by the Portuguese to identify the enemy in Morocco. But Zurara's apparent confidence in applying the term to the nineteen men who got away is belied, first of all, by his characterization of the novelty of the contact between the

28. This is not to mention the Syrians who immigrated to Muslim Spain in large numbers within a few decades of the conquest.

29. Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1990), 40.

Portuguese and these "Moors," and secondly by his own uncertainty as to their religious identity. After describing Gonçalves's disappointment at not having fulfilled Henry's wishes, Zurara wrote that he returned to Portugal "without having any certain knowledge as to whether these men were Moors or gentiles, or as to what kind of life they led or manner of living they had."³⁰ In other words, though Zurara did not hesitate to call the people of Rio d'Ouro "Moors" in presumably an ethnic or geographic sense, he was not at all confident about the appropriateness of their inclusion in the religious category "Moor."

Henry's wish to interview someone from this region was not granted for yet another five years. The next three ships that were sent to the Rio d'Ouro region went looking not for men but for sea lions, the coats and oil of which had apparently sparked some commercial interest at home.³¹ The third of these expeditions (1441), however, was commanded by Henry's chamberlain, Antão Gonçalves, and he, after securing his cargo, gave orders to put men ashore to try once again to capture someone from the area. After searching in vain, the nine Portuguese were returning to the ship when suddenly they came upon "a naked man, leading a camel and carrying two spears in his hand."³² The Portuguese set out after him on foot.

Again Zurara emphasized the fortitude and valor of the would-be knights, masking the one-sidedness of the struggle: "As our men pursued him, none gave in to his great fatigue. Though he was only one, and saw that the others were many, still he wanted to show that his arms were worthy and began to defend himself as best he could, showing a bolder front than his strength warranted."³³ While leading their wounded captive back to the ship, the Portuguese encountered a group that was more than twice as large as their own. Less comfortable with

30. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 10, p. 62; *Chronicle*, 38. Zurara's confusion stemmed from the fact that, while these peoples may have resembled the Moors of Morocco in physical appearance, they had not experienced any significant contact with Islam. They were, in the words of A. J. Dias Dinis, "isolated from Islamic community in general and removed from the caravan routes . . . ; they were not referenced by Arab authors or by Sudanese chroniclers"; "As tribas da Guiné portuguesa na historia (algumas notas)," in *Congresso comemorativo*, 1:242. Likewise, A. Teixeira Mota has observed that "the natives were almost entirely animists; hardly any of the chiefs or their auxiliaries had converted to Islam"; *Guiné Portuguesa* (Lisbon: Agencia Geral do Ultramar, 1954), 1:250.

31. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 11, p. 63; *Chronicle*, 38.

32. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 12, p. 71; *Chronicle*, 42.

33. *Ibid.*

the odds, they continued on their way. But shortly afterwards they came upon a "black Mooress" (*moura negra*), whom they took to be one of the slaves of the group and, after some deliberation, captured her as well.³⁴

Again there is little in the way of description of the captives. The male is simply a naked, poorly armed man. The female is a "black Mooress," a slave. Thanks to the timely arrival of another Portuguese ship at Rio d'Ouro, a ship that counted among its crew one of Prince Henry's Arab servants, Antão Gonçalves could interrogate his captives in "Moorish." But neither the naked man nor the "black Mooress" understood. "Their language," Zurara observed, "was very different."³⁵ Again, despite the accumulation of incongruities between the image of the "Moor" that the Portuguese brought with them and their empirical experience of these naked, religiously unidentified, non-"Moorish"-speaking inhabitants of this part of West Africa, they remained, in Zurara's mind, Moors.

Henry had sent the second ship, under the command of Nuno Tristão (yet another member of his court), to push still further down the coast and to try yet again to secure some captives. For his part, Tristão was determined to do just that. "I should be dishonored, holding the order of knighthood as I do, if I secured here no richer booty than this, by which the Lord Prince may begin to recover some of the great expenses he has incurred."³⁶ He encouraged Antão Gonçalves to join him: "Although you are carrying off these two souls through whom the Prince may come to learn something, that does not prevent what is better still, namely for us to carry off many more. For besides the knowledge which the Lord Prince will gain through them, profit will also accrue to him from their service (*serventya*) or ransom (*rendiçom*)."³⁷

This is the first reference to the use of these captives for any other purpose than that of providing Henry with information about the land that they inhabited. While it is tempting to look forward and see this as an embryonic stage in the development of the Portuguese trans-Atlantic slave trade, it is more appropriate to look back and under-

34. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 12, pp. 71-72; *Chronicle*, 43.

35. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 13, p. 72; *Chronicle*, 45.

36. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 13, p. 75; *Chronicle*, 45-46.

37. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 13, p. 75; *Chronicle*, 46.

stand that Nuno Tristão's attitude toward the captives was, in itself, a legacy of the *reconquista*. The battles and raids of the Iberian reconquest and its aftermath inevitably yielded prisoners. And just as inevitably, these prisoners were considered to be part of the booty of their captors. Those who could afford to redeem themselves by paying their ransom did so. Those who could not were sold into slavery. It is important to realize how generic a process this was in the Mediterranean world as a whole and, more specifically, in Spain, where, from the twelfth century on, the frontier between Christendom and Islam was so unstable. Even after the mid thirteenth century, when the Muslim threat was more or less confined to North Africa, the raids (and hence the captures and ransoms) continued, though now primarily on the sea rather than on land. The elaborate structures that developed on both the Iberian and North African sides of the straits to deal with the ransoming of captives testify to the "business as usual" nature of the process.³⁸ The early thirteenth century even saw the emergence of the Mercedarian Order in the Crown of Aragon, whose principal function it was to raise money to expedite the release of captives whose financial circumstances did not permit them to take advantage of traditional avenues of redemption.³⁹

Tristão's (and Zurara's) assessment of the value of the captives as potential sources of revenue should, I think, be seen in this context. As Portuguese noblemen living in this period, both Zurara and Tristão would have understood the relationship between capture, ransoming, and enslavement. That they should treat the peoples of the Rio d'Ouro region in this way implies that, while the use of the term "Moor" may have been a rather loose one, once applied it suggested to the Portuguese patterns of behavior vis-à-vis the West Africans that had been well defined over the long history of Christian-Muslim rivalry on the Iberian peninsula.⁴⁰

Tristão's proposition to Antão Gonçalves fell on deaf ears. After

38. Diffie and Winius, *Foundations*, 47.

39. James W. Brodman, *Ransoming Captives in Crusader Spain: The Order of Merced on the Christian-Islamic Frontier* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).

40. As Saunders has observed, "Seizure of prisoners for these purposes was an established practice of the Portuguese, who had been raiding the coasts of Morocco for the previous two centuries. Evidently both the Infante D. Henrique and his captains thought of their activities as a southward extension of operations in Morocco"; "The Depiction of Trade as War," 219.

all, he already had his captives and, according to Zurara, wondered whether he might be tempting fate not to be content with the bird in hand. But a number of Gonçalves's men agreed to join Tristão's forces, and together they set out to find the band that had been spotted earlier. Tristão and his men came upon the camp after nightfall and attacked without warning. The result: four dead and ten taken prisoner, some of them women and children. Again the Arab interpreter tried in vain to communicate with the captive "Moors." This time Zurara offered his reader an explanation: "because the language of these people was not Moorish, but *Azaneguya* of *Zaara* [Sahara], for so they name that land."⁴¹ This is an interesting piece of information. "Azaneguya" is clearly a transliteration of the singular form of "Idzagen" (Azenug), the name of a nomadic Berber people who inhabited the western Sahara.⁴² It is highly unlikely that either Zurara or the sea-captain who originally recorded this observation knew, in the way that modern ethnographers know, that the "Azanegues," as Berbers, were ethnically related to the Moors of Morocco. Far more likely, Zurara's attribution of "Moor-ness" was simply a product of his predisposition—based, as we suggested, on skin color and geography—to see the West Africans as "Moors." What is significant here is not that Zurara happened to identify these West Africans "correctly" as "Azanegues," but that having acknowledged that they dressed differently, showed no clear signs of being Muslims, spoke *Azaneguya*, and called their homeland "*Zaara*," he should continue to refer to them as Moors.⁴³

As it turned out, one of the ten captives, whom Zurara took to be a noble (*cavaleiro*) on the grounds that "he showed in his countenance that he held the pre-eminence of nobility over the others," did finally prove able to understand the Arab. This man—whose presumed social stature entitled him to have his name (Adahu) recorded in the *Crónica*—had, observed Zurara, "seen more and better things" than the rest

41. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 13, p. 78; *Chronicle*, 49.

42. Trimingham, *Islam in West Africa*, 20; A. C. de C. M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441-1555* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 181. The Arabic term for the Idzagen is Sanhaja.

43. On occasion, Zurara distinguished between the two peoples by using the term "Azanegue" or by referring to the "other Moors" who lived adjacent to Portugal. Zurara, *Crónica*, chaps. 60, 32, 56, and 77, pp. 260, 152, 247, and 343; *Chronicle*, 177, 101, 169, and 234. Once he described Azanegues as a subset of Moor: "[os] mouros que som chamados Azanegues"; chap. 49, p. 255; *Chronicle*, 175. And once, toward the very end of the *Crónica*, he identified the Azanegues as Muslims: "They are all of the sect of Muhammad and are called Arabs, Azanegues, and Berbers" (*Alarves, e Azengues, e Barbaros*); chap. 77, p. 342; *Chronicle*, 233.

and had "visited other lands where he had learned the Moorish language."⁴⁴ This is the first evidence that Zurara provides for contact—presumably commercial contact—between the "Moors" of the Rio d'Ouro and the more familiar Arabic-speaking Moors of the north.

Tristão and Gonçalves decided to put the Arab interpreter and one of the captured women on shore so that they could try to inform others in the area that "if they wished to come and speak to them about the ransom of some of those whom they had taken prisoner, or traffic in merchandise, they might do so."⁴⁵ After two days a group of some 150 "Moors," some on horse and camel back, came to the shore in the company of the Arabic-speaking interpreter that the Portuguese had sent to negotiate the ransom. Zurara reports that in appearance they seemed a "people both barbarous and bestial (*gente barbaryca e bestial*)," but, as he observed, "they were not wanting in a certain astuteness with which they sought to deceive their enemies."⁴⁶ For only three of them actually came to the shore, as if to draw the unsuspecting Portuguese into an ambush. But they did not fall for it. It is an interesting commentary on the society in which Zurara lived that he should consider this abortive act of treachery as a sign that these people were not as barbaric or bestial as they looked. Be that as it may, the Portuguese took it all as a sign of bad faith, divided up the remaining captives as booty, and set sail for home. The ease with which Zurara, in this episode, lapsed into the language of war (captives, prisoners, enemies, ambushes) again suggests that in his mind, as well as Tristão's, the peoples with whom they were dealing were considered of a kind with the enemy in Morocco, despite their singularly "barbaric and bestial" appearance.

Nor did Prince Henry, at least as a character in the *Crónica dos feitos de Guiné*, have any apparent difficulties with this transition from the use of captives for information to using them for profit.⁴⁷ Zurara described the elation of the prince at finally seeing some return on his

44. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 13, p. 79; *Chronicle*, 49.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. The labor shortage, from which Europe did not recover during the century following the first and most devastating outbreak of the plague in 1348, added to the attractiveness of slaves as a commercial commodity. The labor needs of the newly exploited Atlantic islands were met in part by the importation of slaves. William D. Phillips, Jr., "The Old World Background of Slavery," in Barbara L. Solow, ed., *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 59–61. For more information, see William D. Phillips, Jr., *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), and Godinho, *A Economia dos descobrimentos Henriquinos*, 69–81.

investment; his "joy, not so much for the number of captives taken, as for the hope that [he] conceived of the others that could be taken."⁴⁸ Zurara is quick to add, however, that Henry was interested in more than material benefits. "For though their bodies were now brought into some subjection, that was a small matter in comparison of their souls, which would now possess true freedom for evermore."⁴⁹ This is, under the circumstances, a curious observation. Did Zurara feel that he had to exculpate the prince for enslaving these people? Did he or did he not see them as he saw the Moors of Morocco: as legitimately enslavable prisoners of war?

This question would seem to be answered in the very next chapter, which recounts Henry's decision to launch a crusade, a move that really only makes sense if the enemy is perceived as a threat to Christendom; in this case, only if they are seen as religiously "Moorish." As Zurara reports, Henry sent an embassy to Rome and received for his troubles a papal bull, which is transcribed in its entirety in the *Crónica*. In it, Eugenius IV approved of Henry's plan to contribute to the "destruction and confusion of the Moors and the enemies of Christ" by "making war under the banner of the Order [of Christ] against the said Moors and the other enemies of the faith." The pope went so far as to grant an indulgence to all participants.⁵⁰ What exactly did Henry (and the pope) have in mind? Was Adahu a Muslim? Did he tell Henry that those regions were inhabited or controlled by Muslims? Or are we still dealing with an uninformed conflation of people in the Rio d'Ouro region and the Muslims of Morocco?

Zurara went on to relate how Adahu longed to be set free (which, incidently, Zurara interpreted as another sign of his inherent nobility, since no highborn person could be content living in captivity), promising that he would give five or six "black Moors" in exchange for his release. Furthermore, he assured Henry that there were two others among the captives who could raise a similar ransom in the form of "black Moors." Although we have already met a "black Mooress," Zurara felt obliged on this occasion to offer an explanation:

48. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 14, pp. 82-83; *Chronicle*, 51.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 15, pp. 85-86; *Chronicle*, 53. For papal involvement in the Portuguese expeditions, see C. M. de Witte, "Les Bulles pontificales et l'expansion portugaise," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 48 (1953): 683-718; 49 (1954): 438-61; 50 (1956): 413-53, 809-36; 63 (1958): 5-46, 443-71.

Here you must note that these blacks were Moors like the others, though their slaves, in accordance with ancient custom, which I believe to have been because of the curse which, after the flood, Noah laid upon his son Ham, cursing him in this way: that his race should be subject to all the other races of the world. And from his race these [blacks] are descended.⁵¹

This is an interesting observation on Zurara's part for two reasons. First, the reader is presented with entirely new grounds—biological ones—for enslavement. If the "Moors" could be enslaved as prisoners of war, the "black Moors" could be enslaved as the accursed descendants of Ham.⁵² Second, if this genealogy of the "black Moors" set them apart from the Moors proper, how is it that Zurara could claim that "these blacks were Moors like the others"? Did he mean this in a religious sense? No. For when recounting Henry's reasons for authorizing the ransom of Adahu, Zurara observed that "it was better to save ten souls than three—for though they were black, yet they had souls like the others, and all the more as these blacks did not come from the lineage of the Moors but of the Gentiles, and so the better to bring into the path of salvation."⁵³ Zurara is, in other words, drawing a clear religious distinction between the "Moors" and the "black Moors," the latter being considered pagan and therefore more likely to embrace Christianity than Muslims would be. Again, the elasticity of the category "Moor" is impressive.

Henry sent Antão Gonçalves along with Henry's personal *alfaquete* (that is, his official ransomer) back to the Rio d'Ouro to oversee the ransoming of Adahu. Well dressed, according to Portuguese fashion, in an effort to attract the attention of his people and thus encourage future trade, Adahu was sent ashore to secure his ransom. "But as soon as he was free," wrote Zurara, "he forgot very quickly all about his promises, on the security of which Antão Gonçalves had trusted him, thinking that the nobility he displayed would be the chief hindrance of any breach of faith on his part. But his deceit thenceforth alerted all our men not to trust one of that race except under the most

51. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 16, p. 88; *Chronicle*, 54.

52. On the curse of Ham and its application to black Africans, see 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.

53. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 16, p. 89; *Chronicle*, 55.

certain security.”⁵⁴ The Portuguese were more careful with their two remaining captives, ultimately securing ten blacks, both male and female, in exchange.⁵⁵ Antão Gonçalves was also pleased to receive a little gold dust, an oxhide shield, and a number of ostrich eggs. Upon returning to Portugal, he presented them all to a delighted Prince Henry.

But this was only the beginning. Nuno Tristão set out again in 1443 and returned with 29 captives. There is no mention of any attempt to try to ransom them. According to the *Crónica*, it was the success of this expedition that marked the beginning of broader Portuguese interest in Henry’s program. Those who had been initially skeptical about his “African project” were the first to petition the Prince for licenses “to go to that land from which came those Moorish captives.”⁵⁶ The first to receive such a license—one Lançarote, the royal tax collector of Lagos who joined forces with Gil Eanes, the first to sail south of Bojador—prepared six armed caravels and began to round up the inhabitants of Arguim and other coastal islands in the area. Their first attack yielded 165 captives, so many that Zurara, who knew his Old Testament, was ready to see the hand of God at work, aiding so few Christians against so many Moors.⁵⁷ This is the first occasion on which Zurara refers to the Portuguese in religious terms—that is, as Christians—a subtle shift that perhaps helped to prop up the shaky connections between a slaving expedition and a holy war. At one point he even has Lançarote and his men shout out “Santiago,” “São Jorge,” and “Portugal,” as their battle cry before engaging their enemy. The two saints—James and George—were traditionally invoked in the battle cries of the thirteenth-century *reconquista*.⁵⁸

Lançarote and Gil Eanes continued in this manner to fill their ships with captives—235 of them in all.⁵⁹ Transporting them to Lagos, Lançarote brought them to a field outside the city, where they were to be divided up as booty. Zurara was himself present at the division, and thus for the first time we get a direct glimpse of these “Moors.”

54. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 16, p. 91; *Chronicle*, 56.

55. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 16, p. 91; *Chronicle*, 57.

56. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 18, pp. 99–100; *Chronicle*, 61.

57. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 19, p. 105; *Chronicle*, 66–67.

58. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 19, p. 104; *Chronicle*, 66. See also chaps. 13, 36, 45, 65, and 90, pp. 77, 170, 203, 296, and 399; *Chronicle*, 47, 114, 140, 200–201, 272.

59. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 24, p. 123; *Chronicle*, 80.

And these, placed altogether in that field, were a marvellous sight; for amongst them were some who were fairly white, handsome, and well-proportioned; others were less white, more like brown; others again were as black as Ethiopians and so ugly both in face and in body as almost to appear, to those who looked upon them, the images of the lower hemisphere.⁶⁰

It is telling that Zurara should give us our first real physical description of the captives in the context of a division of booty, when presumably their looks and stature were the most important factors in determining their relative value. But just when it appears that Zurara is perfectly content to consider these "Moors" to be slaves as a function either of their status as prisoners of war or of their descent from Ham, his tone changes dramatically.

O Heavenly Father . . . I pray that my tears may not wrong my conscience; for it is not their religion but their humanity that makes me weep in pity for their suffering. If brute animals, with their bestial feelings, by a natural instinct understand the sufferings of their own kind, what would you have my human nature do on seeing before my eyes that miserable company and remembering that they too are of the generation of the sons of Adam?⁶¹

Such an empathetic portrayal, one which focuses the reader's attention on the one basic common feature that connected Zurara and the slaves, would seem to fly in the face of his previous characterizations. But not if we consider the fact that Zurara was writing some years after these events and thus had the benefit of knowing that many would convert to Christianity. He observed:

As soon as they understood our language they turned Christians with little effort; and I who put together this history in this volume, saw in the town of Lagos boys and girls (the children and grandchildren of those first captives, born in this land) as good and true Christians as if from the beginning they had descended from the dispensation of Christ, from those who were first baptised.⁶²

60. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 25, p. 125; *Chronicle*, 81.

61. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 25, p. 124; *Chronicle*, 80-81.

62. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 25, p. 127; *Chronicle*, 83.

Zurara could for the first time see and sympathize with the humanity of the West African slaves, knowing that they, by becoming Christians, had become his equals in the eyes of God. This did not, of course, mean that they had become Zurara's equals in the eyes of mid-fifteenth-century Portuguese society. They were, after all, slaves.

I said at the outset that Zurara "Mooricized" the peoples encountered south of Cape Bojador. If we can legitimately treat Zurara's views as representative of a court ethos, we might say that the Portuguese sea-captains, when confronted with the novelty of the peoples of the Rio d'Ouro and Arguim—who struck them variously as "bestial," "barbaric," untrustworthy, poorly clothed, non-Arabic-speaking, and pagan—responded by placing them in a preexisting category that had meaning for them: "Moors." This had the effect of depriving these peoples of any cultural distinctiveness.⁶³ But in more practical terms, this crude categorization created a context for Portuguese aggression toward the West Africans. For the category "Moor" in the mind of Zurara—and, we assume, in the minds of Afonso and the Portuguese sea-captains as well—carried with it a very specific blueprint for action. Insofar as these peoples were regarded as Moors in some general sense, they found themselves being treated as Moors in a very specific sense: as an enemy to be fought, captured, and sold into slavery. Even when Zurara finally enunciates the concept of "natural slavery," he does so as a subcategory of the enslavement of Moorish prisoners of war.⁶⁴

It is interesting in this context to note that, though he was writing in 1453, Zurara ended his *Crónica dos feitos de Guiné* in 1448. This was not for lack of subsequent slaving expeditions. They continued and Zurara knew it. But after 1448, the process by which the slaves were procured had become, according to Zurara, too commercial and there-

63. On this point, see Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer 1987): 65–81 (esp. 69–71).

64. Zurara provides us with a glimpse of this same process at work in Henry's dining room after the prince ordered his cooks to prepare the ostrich eggs that Antão Gonçalves had given him. Always with an eye to the promotion of Henry and his overseas program, Zurara proudly observed, "We may well presume that no other Christian prince in this part of Christendom had dishes like these upon his table." But in the end it was not the exoticism of the meal that Henry found most noteworthy. On the contrary, when the three bowls of eggs arrived from the kitchen and Henry tasted their contents, he proudly pronounced them "as fresh and as good as if they had come from any domestic fowl." Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 16, p. 92; *Chronicle*, 57.

fore no longer conducive to acts of chivalry. In his own words, "the affairs of these parts were henceforth treated more by the commerce and bargaining of merchants than by bravery and toil of arms."⁶⁵ The old—and in Zurara's opinion, noble—form of slavery as a product of military action against the Moorish enemy had given way to slavery as a product of trade in peoples deemed enslavable by virtue of their inferiority as human beings. This observation on Zurara's part suggests that the two accepted categories for enslavement among the Portuguese at that time were at least partly functions of class. Portuguese nobles, longing for some empirical justification of their privileged status, were more than ready to regard their slaving activities as extensions of the crusade against Islam. But from the perspective of the merchants, who were less concerned with acts of valor than with commerce, it made sense to transform the West Africans—at least the black ones—into commodities and regard them as natural slaves.⁶⁶ As the merchants took over the process of acquiring slaves, it was to be expected that slavery as a function of warfare should give way to slavery as a function of biology.

I would like to thank Rita Costa Gomes, William D. Phillips, Jr., Carl Hanson, and Sid Lemelle for reading drafts of this study and sharing their insights with me. Above all I am indebted to Sylvia Schafer for helping me begin to appreciate how complex my choice of topic really was.

65. Zurara, *Crónica*, chap. 96, p. 426; *Chronicle*, 288. Saunders notes that with this shift from warlike to commercial slaving expeditions came a shift from *mouros* to *escravos* to describe the victims (Saunders, *Social History of Black Slaves*, xiii, 5). See also A. Teixeira da Mota, *A Descoberta da Guiné* (Lisbon, 1946), 309–12.

66. This is not to suggest that these interpretative structures did not interpenetrate or that there were, in fifteenth-century Portugal, hard and fast distinctions between the nobility and the merchants.