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Zurara and the Emergence of Racialized Justifications for Enslavement During the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Antonia Jaros

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Abstract

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This essay examines the evolving justifications for the 15th and 16th-century Portuguese Atlantic slave trade, focusing on how Gomes Eanes de Zurara and later authors depicted enslaved sub-Saharan Africans. It traces the transition from religious and Islamophobic rationales to a racialized discourse that emphasized bodily features as markers of inferiority. This shift in justifications was connected to a change in elite moral and ideological conceptions as well as changes in practical aspects of the slave trade, including the necessity to verify that enslavement in major hubs such as Luanda was "lawful".

1. Introduction

The Atlantic slave trade which evolved in the mid-fifteenth century is an important aspect of early modern history. Emerging alongside imperial expansions, it did not only influence West Central Africa in many ways but also had an impact on the Iberian[1]

1 The early modern usage of the term "Iberia" refers to the Iberian Peninsula, encompassing the crowns of Aragon, Castile and Portugal. Despite their distinct political structures, they were culturally and economically linked across the peninsula.

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economies and societies. This included the intellectual and moral justifications necessary to legitimize practices of enslavement.[2]

This essay examines the difference between Gomes Eanes de Zurara's depiction of slavery and enslaved people in the 15th century and later portrayals by 16th-century authors such as João de Barros and Luis Vaz de Camões.[3] Zurara was a Portuguese court chronicler[4] and is presumed to have lived from 1410 to 1474, although neither his date of birth nor his date of death is known for certain. King Afonso V (1432–1482) is said to have commissioned Zurara to narrate Portuguese voyages to Africa, such as the capture of Ceuta in 1415. Zurara also wrote the book "Crónica dos feitos notáveis que se passaram na conquista de Guiné por mandado do infante D. Henrique"[5] ("Chronicle of the Notable Deeds that Occurred in the Conquest of Guinea by Order of Prince Henry") which was published in 1453[6] in the context of expeditions initiated by the Portuguese Prince Henry the Navigator (1394–1460).[7] This work of Zurara will be referred to as "Crónica de Guiné" in this essay.

In these two works, the language employed to describe sub-Saharan Africans differs vastly.[8] While the vocabulary in "Crónica de Guiné" is closer to racial thinking, the earlier account of Ceuta's capture reflects a strong Islamophobic viewpoint.[9] This propensity for the usage of racial vocabulary can also be seen in the works of later authors, which shows that the justification for slavery shifted from primarily religious lines of argumentation to racially motivated ascriptions.[10] To examine this development, this essay will focus – first – on the depiction of enslaved people[11] in one of the most prominent passages of the "Crónica de Guiné": "The Arrival of Slaves From West Africa in Lagos, 1444" translated by Malyn Newitt.[12] As Zurara was a court chronicler, it is to be assumed that later authors read his works or were at least aware of them.

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2 Anna More, Necroeconomics, Originary Accumulation, and Racial Capitalism in the Early Iberian Slave Trade, in: *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19 (2019), no. 2, pp. 75–100, here p. 78, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26899584, accessed 31.3.2026.

3 Marcelo E. Fuentes, "Crespo e Nuu e Negro". Gomes Eanes de Zurara and the Racialization of Non-Christians by Portuguese Authors, in: *Essays in Medieval Studies* 34 (2018), [DOI 10.1353/ems.2018.0001], pp. 17–38, here p 33.

4 He was also referred to as Gomes Eannes de Azurara, Gomes Annes de Zurara, Gil Eanes or Gil de Zurara.

5 This work of literature is also known as "Crónica dos deitos da Guiné", "Crónica do descobrimento e conquista de Guiné", or other shortened versions of the title.

6 Doc. 35. The Arrival of Slaves From West Africa in Lagos, 1444, in: Malyn Newitt (ed.), The Portuguese in West Africa, 1415–1670. A Documentary History, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press 2010 [ISBN 9780521159142], pp. 148–151.

7 Josiah Blackmore, Reports From the Edges of Iberian Empire, in: Michiel van Groesen/Johannes Müller (eds.), Far From the Truth. Distance, Information, and Credibility in the Early Modern World, London: Routledge 2023 [ISBN 9781032433912], pp. 19–35, here p. 20–21.

8 Fuentes, "Crespo e Nuu e Negro", p. 22.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 29.

11 Recent trends in historiography have shown an increasing tendency to use the terms "enslaved people" or "enslaved persons" rather than "slaves." The aim of this shift is to emphasize the humanity of those subjected to enslavement during the Atlantic slave trade. Therefore, in the following, these terms will be employed as well. James R. Burns, "Slaves" and "Slave Owners" or "Enslaved People" and "Enslavers"?, in: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 2 (2024) [DOI 10.1017/S0080440123000282], pp. 371–388, here pp. 373, 386.

12 Doc. 35, pp. 148–151.

This essay then emphasizes, second, how these differences in language illustrate the shift from theological legitimations to humanistic and economic rationales[13] in the educated elite of Portugal and Iberia as a whole. These changes are noticeable in little differences in the language used by the different authors. Furthermore, it will show that Zurara, in particular, can be regarded as a precursor but not the architect of early modern discourse on what is later described as "race". This distinction between precursor and architect is fundamental as this essay argues that the later authors mentioned above were not the creators of these justifications which underlie their use of vocabulary, but they codified the already existing sentiments in Iberian societies towards enslaved people of African descent. Zurara's vocabulary shows a growing use of racial attributes to describe enslaved people, which implicates a slight change in the justification for slavery; however, this does not implicate Zurara as the architect. Such an interpretation sheds new light on Zurara's role in the emergence and later development of racist ideologies. Although popular works such as "Stamped From the Beginning. The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America" by Ibrahim X Kendi[14] make him out to be the architect of racial ideologies, this essay only sees Zurara as a precursor.

This argument is fleshed out through an analysis of the primary source as well as articles such as "'Crespo e Nuu e Negro'. Gomes Eanes de Zurara and the Racialization of Non-Christians by Portuguese Authors" by Marcelo E. Fuentes,[15] which focuses on the cultural shift in Iberia from the 15th to the 16th century and its reflection in the works of contemporary authors. Additionally, highlighting differences in the depiction of slavery and enslaved people, this essay aims to demonstrate how the educated Iberian elites constructed, supported, and/or critiqued justifications for the Atlantic slave trade. A central part of this essay is a source critique of Gomes Eandes de Zurara's description of the arrival of African enslaved people in Lagos[16] in "Crónica de Guiné". The existence of Zurara's and subsequent writings in which slavery and its justification were addressed indicates that there was an active discourse on slavery and its legitimization.[17]

This source analysis employs terminology associated with the modern concept of racism in order to examine justifications of the early Atlantic slave trade.[18] Although there is an extensive historiographical debate cautioning against the use of the terms "race" and "racial" in discourses about the period preceding the formalized biological theories of the 18th and 19th century, this study aligns with scholarship that understands the Iberian Atlantic as a formative context for the systematic production of difference as racialized and hereditary.[19] Central to this process were the "limpieza de sangre" (purity of blood)

13 More, Necroeconomics, Originary Accumulation, and Racial Capitalism in the Early Iberian Slave Trade, p. 93.
14 Ibram X. Kendi, Stamped From the Beginning. The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America (History / African American Studies), New York: Bold Type Books 2016 [ISBN 9781568584638], p. 89.
15 Fuentes, "Crespo e Nuu e Negro".
16 The seaport in Portugal.
17 More, Necroeconomics, Originary Accumulation, and Racial Capitalism in the Early Iberian Slave Trade, p. 75.
18 Ibid., p. 43.
19 Jessica L. Delgado/Kelsey C. Moss, Religion and Race in the Early Modern Iberian Atlantic, in: Kathryn Gin Lum/Paul Harvey (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History (Oxford Handbooks), New York: Oxford University Press 2018 [ISBN 9780190221171], pp. 40–60, here pp. 45–46.

statutes established in fifteenth-century Iberia,[20] which framed religious origins and perceived cultural deficiencies as inherent and inheritable through lineage. "Limpieza de sangre" is based on the notion that baptism ceased to guarantee complete purity, given that the concept of "raza" often denoted a "stain" associated with Jewish or Muslim descent.[21] As the presence of sub-Saharan Africans became more common in Iberia, they were incorporated in this existing scheme of classification.[22] With the growing presence of people not descending from "pure" Christian lineage, phenotypic markers increasingly influenced assessments of status, with skin-color being just one factor.[23] Because skin-color became central in later racial ideology, the gradual shift toward classificatory practices which focused more explicitly on skin-color was an important step in the "racialization" of difference.[24]

In "The Arrival of Slaves From West Africa in Lagos, 1444", Zurara describes the return of caravels to the Portuguese shore and how captives were divided publicly, with one fifth subsequently chosen by Prince Henry personally.[25] The arrival of the captives must be understood within the broader context of early Portuguese overseas expansion.[26] It is important to emphasize that slavery was not new to the Iberian Peninsula since enslaved people of many ethnicities had long been present.[27] Yet sub-Saharan Africans were a minority predating the Atlantic slave trade as enslaved people taken "from the lands around the Black Sea"[28] could be transported on trade routes already established for the transportation of commodities. In general, slave trading was conducted across the Mediterranean.[29]

A shift toward a racialized understanding of slavery emerged with the onset of Portugal's overseas expansion, starting with the capture of Ceuta in 1415,[30] as is evident in the already mentioned passage of the "Crónica de Guiné". However, the justification for slavery based on religion was still prevalent in Zurara's works, especially in the expression of pity for the captives. He writes:

> "Thee I pray Thee that my tears may not wrong my conscience, for it is not their religion but their humanity that makes me to weep in pity for their sufferings."[31]

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20 Jessica L. Delgado/Kelsey C. Moss, Religion and Race in the Early Modern Iberian Atlantic, in: Kathryn Gin Lum/Paul Harvey (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History (Oxford Handbooks), New York: Oxford University Press 2018 [ISBN 9780190221171], pp. 40–60, here p. 41.

21 Mercedes García-Arenal, Divided by Blood. Race and Religion in Early-Modern Iberia, in: *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 61 (2024), no. 2 [DOI 10.1177/00194646241241671], pp. 253–277, here p. 259.

22 Fuentes, "Crespo e Nuu e Negro", p. 48.

23 Delgado/Moss, Religion and Race in the Early Modern Iberian Atlantic, p. 49.

24 Fuentes, "Crespo e Nuu e Negro", p. 1.

25 Doc. 35, p. 149.

26 Bartolomé Yun Casalilla, Iberian World Empires and the Globalization of Europe 1415–1668 (Palgrave Studies in Comparative Global History 1), Basingstoke: Springer Nature 2019 [ISBN 9789811308338], p. 7.

27 Pamela A. Patton, What Did Medieval Slavery Look Like? Color, Race, and Unfreedom in Later Medieval Iberia, in: *Speculum* 97 (2022), no. 3 [DOI 10.1086/720119], pp. 649–697, here p. 659.

28 Erin K. Rowe, Enslaved and Free Black Africans in Early Modern Spain, in: Rodrigo C. Casal u. a. (eds.), The Routledge Hispanic Studies Companion to Early Modern Spanish Literature and Culture, London: Routledge 2022 [ISBN 9781351108713], pp. 537–552, here p. 539.

29 Patton, What Did Medieval Slavery Look Like?, pp. 660–661.

30 Blackmore, Reports From the Edges of Iberian Empire, p. 20.

31 Doc. 35, p. 149.

This plea for divine forgiveness reveals a moral tension within traditional religious justification of slavery predating the overseas expansion. The religious justification was based on the concept of "just war"[32] as supported by papal authority through a series of bulls.[33] Dum Diversas (1452) granted the Portuguese crown permission to "conquer all pagans, enslave them and appropriate their lands and goods"[34] while the Romanus Pontifex (1455) confirmed Portuguese jurisdiction over trade in the appropriated territories such as Ceuta and Guinea. Therefore, no Christian without a licence issued by the Portuguese King was permitted to approach the appropriated territories, let alone conduct any form of trade there. Additionally, it reiterated the legitimacy of practices of enslavement in Inter Caetera (1456) which applied the provision of Romanus Pontifex to populations referred to as "Indians' (usque ad Indos)".[35] However, this purely religious rational proved insufficient for the transatlantic slave trade that would develop in the following decades,[36] since the groundwork for a racialized rational had already been laid in Zurara's time. This is apparent in Zurara's description of the captives later in the text where he emphasizes racial differences:

> "[…] when these were placed all together in that field, they were a marvelous sight, for amongst them were some quite white, fair to look upon and well proportioned, others were less white like mulattoes, others again were as black as Ethiopians and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear (to those who saw them) the images of the lower hemisphere."[37]

In this depiction, Zurara distinguishes between captives resembling Europeans, described as "fair to look upon"[38] and darker-skinned individuals portrayed as "ugly, both in features and in body".[39] The vocabulary used by Zurara differentiates between the former, for which he uses appreciative words, and the latter, for which he uses derogative language. This difference in vocabulary used to describe enslaved people of different skin-colors implicates a racial thinking by Zurara. Additionally, the description of the different skin-colors functions as a demonstration "of the extent of Portuguese's [sic!] power and the variety of the peoples they aspired to conquer and convert".[40] It is important to emphasize, however, that the latter's aim was pursued with minimal effort, primarily to maintain the papal blessing.[41] Although Zurara acknowledges the differences of enslaved people at the slave market, elsewhere in the "Crónica de Guiné" he presents the majority of those killed or captured by the Portuguese as a group sharing uniform

32 In Christian thought, "just war" referred to a moral doctrine that sought to limit warfare by subjecting it to strict ethical conditions. A war was considered just if declared by a legitimate authority, fought for a just cause, such as defence against grave injustice, and aimed at restoring peace rather than pursuing conquest or glory.
33 More, Necroeconomics, Originary Accumulation, and Racial Capitalism in the Early Iberian Slave Trade, p. 89.
34 Kent McNeil, The Papal Bulls Dividing the Americas Between Spain and Portugal. A Reappraisal, in: *Journal of the History of International Law* 26 (2024), no. 4 [DOI 10.1163/15718050-bja10114], pp. 351–382, here p. 373.
35 Ibid., pp. 359–365.
36 More, Necroeconomics, Originary Accumulation, and Racial Capitalism in the Early Iberian Slave Trade, p. 89.
37 Doc. 35, p. 150.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Fuentes, "Crespo e Nuu e Negro", p. 19.
41 Ibid.

physical and cultural traits. Those descriptions extend beyond physical appearance to include traits such as nakedness, rudimentary weaponry, and the supported absence of an intelligible language.[42] This anticipates characteristics that authors in the 16th century, such as the aforementioned João de Barros and Luís Vaz de Camoes, would incorporate in their own works.[43] However, despite of Zurara's chronicle having a racialized undertone, Fuentes argues that he was "often overwhelmed by the conceptual difficulties of transitioning from Islamophobia to racism".[44] Nevertheless, the shift from locating cultural inferiority in religious alterity to locating it in bodily difference is clearly visible.[45]

Such allegations of cultural inferiority served as a justification for slavery and reinforced Zurara's assertion that enslavement was the only path to salvation for sub-Saharan Africans. This perspective was further legitimized by Prince Henry, who was portrayed by Zurara as endorsing slavery as an integral part of his Christian mission.[46] While religious elements remained central to assign inferiority and legitimize enslavement, physical features gained in importance.

The idea of bodily features as marks of inferiority is also visible in the 1552 publication of the first volume of João de Barros's "Ásia", in which he attributes characteristics he associates with Africans to indigenous Americans, ascribing an alleged lack of civilization to both – a trope already well established in early modern descriptions of sub-Saharan Africans. This association between sub-Saharan Africans and supposed cultural primitivism intensified over time. Only three years before the founding of Luanda, depictions of "black and naked African savages are already so commonplace that they can be pointed out and dismissed in few words",[47] as was evidenced in Luís Vaz de Camões's "Os Lusíadas" published in 1572.[48]

This transition played a significant role in the subsequent development of the transatlantic slave trade since it marked a key step away from the notion that the capture of individuals for enslavement was justified by religious or "just war". This growing tendency to interpret bodily features as marks of inferiority was reflected in the daily commercial practice in the slave trade: the verification of whether a captive had been lawfully enslaved, since people recognized as free by law could not be turned into slaves.[49] This requirement held particular significance in major slave-trading centres of the Iberian Union,[50] such as Luanda in West-Central Africa, which, after its founding in 1575, rapidly emerged as a principal hub of the transatlantic slave trade.[51] By the late 16th and the early 17th century, theologians increasingly argued that traders bore a moral obligation

42 Fuentes, "Crespo e Nuu e Negro", p. 22.
43 Ibid., p. 27.
44 Ibid., p. 22.
45 Ibid., p. 22.
46 Doc. 35, p. 151.
47 Fuentes, "Crespo e Nuu e Negro", p. 28.
48 Ibid.
49 More, Necroeconomics, Originary Accumulation, and Racial Capitalism in the Early Iberian Slave Trade, pp. 90–95.
50 David Wheat, Iberian Roots of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1440–1640, in: *History Now* 25 (2010), https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/iberian-roots-transatlantic-slave-trade-1440-1640, accessed 31.3.2026.
51 Ibid.

to determine the legality of captives' seizure. Yet they recognized that this obligation posed a profound difficulty in practice because many sellers may have been unwilling to provide this information. Moreover, as Luis de Molina observed, most enslaved people were captured illicitly in African wars. This would not have been a problem considering that it was legal to enslave people captured through a "just war", but the dominant view was that African wars "were almost never just wars and thus it is likely that most of the enslavements had been unjust."[52] Faced with this impasse, theologians concluded that middlemen were exempt from further investigation. Consequently, purchasers in Luanda and other major nodes of the slave trade network during the Iberian Union were no longer required to verify if the enslavement had been lawful,[53] as stipulated by the Ordenacões Filipinans. These ordinances were finished under Philipp I and Philipp II[54] in 1595[55] and passed during the union of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns.[56] The ordinances incorporated the relevant provisions on slavery contained in the Ordenações Manuelinas and supplemented them with newly issued legal texts addressing the same subject.[57]

Zurara's depiction of sub-Saharan captives in the "Crónica de Guiné", therefore, represents an important moment in the changing justification of slavery. It shows how subtle shifts in the vocabulary employed to describe enslaved individuals reflect a transition many communities on the Iberian Peninsula made from Islamophobic to racially inflected rationales, with religious arguments increasingly coming to be grounded in notions of racial rather than religious difference. The implication of inferiority was increasingly connected to bodily features associated with race rather than to a differing religious belief. This shift produced ripple effects in the works of later authors who focused more heavily on race. In even later works, race and attributes connected with it were only briefly mentioned as the belief in inherent cultural inferiority based on racial differences had become sufficiently widespread to require little further elaboration for readers to understand the implications of these notions. Furthermore, even linguistic difficulties between Portuguese and other peoples were attributed to the others' alleged inherent inferiority. The consequences of this ideological transition were far-reaching, considering that during the Portuguese "Asientos"[58] participants of the transatlantic slave trade were no longer required to verify if the enslaved people were "caught" "lawfully" under the Ordenacões Filipinans of 1595.

52 More, Necroeconomics, Originary Accumulation, and Racial Capitalism in the Early Iberian Slave Trade, p. 92.
53 Ibid., pp. 90–93.
54 Philip II and III of Spain.
55 Filipa Da Ribeiro Silva, Portuguese Slave Legislation and the First Wave of Uprisings by Enslaved Africans in the Iberian Atlantic World, 1400s–1500s, in: *e-Journal of Portuguese History* 20 (2022), no. 1 [DOI 10.26300/ha9r-se93], pp. 24–39, here p. 30.
56 Wheat, Iberian Roots of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1440–1640, p. 3.
57 Da Ribeiro Silva, Portuguese Slave Legislation and the First Wave of Uprisings by Enslaved Africans in the Iberian Atlantic World, 1400s-1500s, in: *e-Journal of Portuguese History* 20 (2022), no. 1 [DOI 10.26300/ha9r-se93], pp. 24–39, here p. 33.
58 The term "Asiento", derived from the Portuguese, refers to a system, in which Spain outsourced the supply of enslaved Africans to foreign merchants, often Portuguese, for a fixed period within a broader system or contract framework.

In summary, while Zurara may not have been the architect of the early modern "discourse on race", he was an important precursor. His "Crónica de Guiné" provides evidence of how the Portuguese and the Iberian elite actively constructed and established new justifications for the transatlantic slave trade. Analysing the language used to depict enslaved individuals further illuminates the rationale employed at the time of the work's emergence, enhancing our understanding of the prevailing notions of morality and contemporary conceptions of humanity.

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Antonia Anna Jaros ist Studentin des Lehramts Geschichte, Sozialkunde und Politische Bildung im 4. Semester an der Universität Innsbruck. Antonia.Jaros@student.uibk.ac.at

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