CHAPTER TWELVE

BLACK AFRICANS IN THE IBERIAN PENINSULA (1400–1820)†

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INTRODUCTION

The title of this chapter is “Black Africans in the Iberian peninsula”, rather than black slaves or slavery in Iberia. In contrast to other minorities in the peninsula—individuals with Jewish or Muslim ancestry—black Africans were seen as unequivocal outsiders, all of them without exception descended from sub-Saharan peoples forced into slavery in the peninsula since at least the late medieval period. For this reason, slavery in all its facets (numbers, legal status, views of slavery and of the enslaved, and the existence of a system of slavery that was according to many distinct from those of other regions) are important, and even central themes of this chapter. However, that is not to say that black Africans were present in the Iberian peninsula only as slaves. Scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the existence, at least since the sixteenth century, of a significant population of African freedmen. As a result, we will consider this group in relation to the dominant political, social, and cultural processes from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century. The goal is not only to understand the treatment of slaves, but also of freedmen, and the extent to which they were able to become part of the Spanish and Portuguese communities that were themselves in the process of being constructed during this period.

For too long, the subject of black Africans in the peninsula, and of slavery in general, was largely ignored by Luso-Spanish scholars. The reason for this was seemingly not the negligible numbers of slaves, and Africans more generally, in the Iberian peninsula from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It was rather due to a kind of historical forgetting, which had assumed the status of a national myth: the belief that the enslavement and exploitation of thousands of black Africans had been an exclusively colonial problem, and never one of the metropolis. Also, and perhaps even more important, the Spaniards, but also the Portuguese, from the early nineteenth century onward fostered the myth that their populations were ethnically homogeneous, with no appreciable admixture of non-Iberian blood. As in many other respects, the Spanish and the Portuguese tended to fashion legends about their historical past, in this case eliding the history of slavery in the peninsula, as well as the discrimination against, and profoundly negative perceptions of black Africans.
and their descendants, or the contribution made by Africans to the formation of national communities.

The last two decades have seen a radical shift in this respect. In recent years, numerous works on this subject have appeared, including attempts to comprehend the numbers of African slaves imported into the peninsula, their origins, their geographic concentration, rates of manumission, and the lives of those who attained their liberty. This new scholarship has also had to contend with the notion of alleged Iberian exceptionalism: the idea that the Hispanic system of slavery exhibited a tendency toward abolitionism long before those of other nations, and that this more liberal system gave slaves opportunities to obtain their freedom, and thus become integrated into Spanish society on their own terms. Some recent studies continue to insist on the relative “benevolence” of the Iberian system of slavery, but many others have demonstrated its no less insidious nature in terms of blocking avenues to freedom and impeding the integration of freedmen and their descendants.

Another recent development, in addition to general studies of the topic, has been the appearance of major studies of individual cities and regions of the peninsula. These works have made it possible to map urban slavery in the Iberian peninsula with some precision—the approximate total number of slaves in these regions, the number of slaves living in the largest cities, as well as the decline of slaveholding everywhere in the eighteenth century. There is a growing body of knowledge on the “confraternities of the blacks”, and other corporate institutions that served to defend their interests and sometimes enabled a measure of social integration. We are also increasingly familiar with early modern Spanish and Portuguese theologians and writers’ views on slavery, and slaves and non-Europeans in general. However, knowledge of rural slavery is still relatively scarce, or, to put it another way, “how slave experiences changed over time or varied between regions of the Iberian Peninsula”. Even more important, it is still unclear how “the many socioeconomic and political changes occurring in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries affected the institution of slavery and the status and treatment of slaves” (Blumenthal 2003, 1001). The same lack of knowledge applies to the process of transition between what has been referred to as the medieval Mediterranean model of slavery and the slave trade, and the early modern Atlantic system of slavery in which Portugal took the lead in the commerce in slaves originating mainly from sub-Saharan Africa. Not a great deal more is known about the wealth derived from the slave trade and the sale of slaves in local markets in the peninsula (Armenteros Martínez 2012, 101–102). Perhaps most importantly, we are largely ignorant of the ways in which slaves and freedmen understood their condition and their role in the Iberian communities where they lived, worked, married, and died.

The studies produced in the last two decades have shown beyond any doubt that Spain and Portugal were not only actively involved in the introduction and exploitation of millions of African slaves in the Americas, but also in the European possessions of these monarchies. Moreover, having been the first to create slave systems on a massive scale, they were the last to support and implement the abolition of slavery, which would not take place in the Iberian colonies until the second half of the nineteenth century. As a Spanish scholar once remarked, “it is incumbent [on the Spaniards]”—and we may also add the Portuguese—“to study the origins of
black slavery, which appeared in Spain before any other European country” (Cortés López 1986, 9).

**THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF SLAVERY IN THE PENINSULA**

There had been slaves in all the political communities into which the Iberian peninsula has been divided, in all periods of their history. Certainly, from the period of Roman domination, through the plethora of Christian and Muslim kingdoms that characterised the medieval political world, but also extending into the monarchies of the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Slaves were present in greater or smaller numbers in all these territories, and at certain points in the course of this long stretch of time they were quite numerous, although in the peninsula—in contrast to the American territories under European domination—there were no slave societies.

The Iberian case is indeed exceptional when compared to other western European regions. In all of the latter slaves were present in large numbers, but until the late fifteenth century the majority were from eastern Europe and the Mediterranean hinterlands. Slavery in the Iberian peninsula itself changed over time and may be understood in terms of distinct phases. There is a clear break between slavery as it existed in the ancient and early modern periods, the first being a vestige of Roman tradition, the latter linked to overseas expansion. From the High Middle Ages onward the enslavement of Christians was no longer permissible (or only in exceptional cases, as punishment for particularly serious crimes) but the enslavement of and trade in enslaved non-Christians continued to be legal. The Muslim conquest of Iberia initiated in 711, marked the beginning of a long period of eight centuries of intermittent warfare, during which the opposing side(s) served as the main source of slaves. Some of these slaves were prisoners of war, but the majority were captured in raids carried out by land or sea into enemy territory (Sweet 1997, 145–150). In 1217, when the Portuguese king Afonso II conquered the city of Alcácer do Sal from the Muslims, 3,000 of its inhabitants who had survived the siege were sold into slavery in Lisbon (Boissellier 1999, 364).

Until virtually the end of the medieval period, although following somewhat distinct chronologies in Portugal and the Spanish kingdoms, the vast majority of slaves were Muslims. In Portugal, where the conquest of the national territory was essentially complete by the middle of the thirteenth century, from that point onward and into the fourteenth century there was a decline in the number of slaves, although slavery did not disappear. The Portuguese would take advantage of every occasion when they lent military assistance to the kings of Castile, and that pitted them directly against Muslim armies, to replenish their supply of Saracen slaves. That is what happened in 1340, in the wake of the decisive battle of Río Salado against the Marinids. On the other hand, piracy and the activities of corsairs were on the rise in the Mediterranean, and one of the most sought-after prizes were precisely Moors of both sexes. However, violence was not the only means of obtaining slaves, as slaves were bought and sold in Lisbon as well as other Portuguese cities. Portuguese merchants in turn procured slaves in foreign markets—there is evidence of such commercial links with Barcelona and Valencia, two great Mediterranean entrepôts.
It is highly likely that it is through these channels that the first black African slaves arrived in Portugal and other Christian Iberian kingdoms.

The slave system imposed in the Iberian peninsula and in Spanish America after 1500 was based on laws and frameworks dating back to medieval Spain. The laws on slavery included in the thirteenth-century *Siete Partidas* were supplemented by slave laws and regulations generated by local authorities in the peninsula, almost all of which aimed at imposing limits to slaves and freedmen. Slavery in the Spanish context was not considered a natural condition—there were no individuals who were destined to be slaves by nature—but rather slavery was seen as the consequence of particular life circumstances. Thus, the *Siete Partidas* held that “servitude is an agreement and regulation which people established in ancient times, by means of which men who were originally free became slaves and were subjected to the authority of others, contrary to natural reason” (Fourth *Partida*, title XXI, law 1). As a result, there were laws to regulate the conditions under which an individual could be enslaved, legal precepts that would serve as the basis of critiques of certain aspects of the slave trade in the early modern period. According to the *Siete Partidas*, slaves could be prisoners taken in just wars, children of enslaved women, those condemned for certain crimes, or those who had been sold into slavery by their parents due to extreme poverty. Beginning in the fifteenth century, generally speaking, only the first two reasons were seen as a legal basis for enslavement. Equally important, the slaves were deprived not only of their independence, control over their own actions, but also power over “their own person” and even “all the earnings obtained by a slave, no matter how he obtains them, will belong to his master” (Fourth *Partida*, title XXI, law 7).

But these laws also stipulated that masters were obliged to attend to the needs of their slaves, not mistreat them, and were certainly forbidden from killing them without cause or the consent of a judge, unless “he [the slave] is found with his [the owner’s] wife, or his daughter, or had committed an equally grave error, in which case he may freely kill him”. Mistreatment without just cause was grounds for slaves to take their complaints to judicial authorities, who could rule that the slave should be sold to another master. In later times, the slaves also had the right to marry—a right protected by the church—although there is evidence that masters did their best to impede such unions. Legally, masters could not break up a slave family unit or sell one of the spouses, or the children of married slaves. As in other slave systems, the children acquired the legal status of the mother. They were considered slaves if the mother was enslaved, free if she was not. Slaves had to be baptised, and to receive some form of religious instruction, although as everyone hastened to point out, baptism was meant to free souls, not bodies. The Spanish system also provided for a number of ways to secure liberty. A slave could demonstrate that he or she had been unjustly enslaved, marry a free man or woman, become ordained as a priest or friar (although these provisions were abolished in the early modern period), secure his or her freedom in the master’s will, or purchase his or her liberty.

The history of slavery in the early modern Iberian world is undeniably complex. Slaves in the peninsula between 1400 and 1600 included Mudéjares (unconverted Muslims) living in Christian territories, inhabitants of the Muslim kingdom of Granada, Albanians, Greeks, Slavs, and other individuals of European extraction generally found on the Mediterranean slave market. To these were added Moriscos...
(converted Muslims), Jews from Northern Africa, Amerindians, and Asians. They exhibited a great diversity of skin colours, from pallid white to black and all shades in between (Martín Casares 2014). However, although Moorish, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Javanese, and slaves of many other origins could be seen on the streets of Portuguese and Spanish cities from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, over the course of these three centuries by far the largest number of slaves in the peninsula had their origin in sub-Saharan Africa, and especially its west coast.

Although there had been black slaves in the peninsula during the medieval period—many of them brought by Muslim merchants and officials—beginning in the fifteenth century the Portuguese and the Spanish became directly involved in the capture and sale of slaves from sub-Saharan Africa. Alongside their incursions and territorial conquests in Morocco, the Portuguese in their caravels were inching their way southwards along the African littoral. The first tangible result of these voyages was the arrival, in 1444, in the port of Lagos, at the southern extremity of Portugal, of the first large contingent of slaves—around 250 men, women, and children captured on the coast of Arguim (modern day Mauritania). In this case, these were still enslaved “moors” (bereberes/azenegues), some of them white-skinned, but that same year, 1444, Portuguese ships reached as far as the Senegal river, and thenceforth, as they proceeded further down Africa’s western shore, the number of black Africans brought over as slaves increased exponentially, initially captured along the coast, and from the middle of the fifteenth century purchased through agreements with local authorities. The Spanish case was similar. There are numerous reports of the presence of “black” slaves, sometimes in very large numbers, in the Canary Islands, Seville, Valencia, and other cities from the mid-fifteenth century.

During the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, slaves obtained on the African coast by Portuguese merchants were mainly destined for Europe and the Atlantic islands where sugar production had been introduced (Madeira, the Canaries, Sâo Tomé). Large numbers of slaves were also re-exported from Portugal to Spain, the Italian states, and northern Europe. Starting in the early years of the sixteenth century, some of the slaves who arrived in Spain were subsequently re-embarked at Seville and Cadiz bound for Spanish America. Direct export of African slaves to the Spanish American colonies was authorised around 1520, with Cape Verde and Sâo Tomé archipelagos becoming the main outposts where Portuguese (and some Spanish) ships took on their human cargoes. Thenceforth Portugal was, at best, a secondary port of arrival for the slave trade, so that in the second half of the sixteenth century slaves arrived only sporadically as part of mixed ship cargoes: slaves, hides, and cotton from Cape Verde; slaves, sugar, and timber from the islands of Sâo Tomé and Príncipe. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, direct trade between Portugal and the African continent had virtually ceased (except for smaller vessels arriving from Cape Verde or Cacheu, in Guinea), and the slaves disembarking in Portugal during this period arrived mainly as “secondary goods”, in the ships of the Carreira da Índia or the inbound fleets from Brazil. Some of these slaves were still making their way to Spanish markets, ending up in different Spanish cities, or the trade fairs of some of the frontier settlements, such as Zafra (Periáñez 2008, 165–175). Nevertheless, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the vast majority of black slaves had been born in the peninsula.
BLACK SLAVES’ NUMBERS AND LIVES

From the early sixteenth century, African slaves could be found in greater or smaller numbers scattered throughout the Iberian peninsula. Given the lack of evidence, it is hard to be very precise about the total number of African slaves who landed in Portugal and Spain during more than three centuries, but it is estimated that between 2,000 and 3,000 slaves arrived annually in the period between 1450 and 1550, and a total of around 400,000 for the whole period from 1450 to 1750, including both legal and contraband shipments (Caldeira 2017, 135–136). Alessandro Stella has calculated that around 700,000 to 800,000 African slaves passed through the Iberian peninsula during this time, around half of whom (350,000 to 400,000) remained in Portugal, and a similar number in the Spanish kingdoms, but in that case the number of arrivals in Portuguese ports must have been higher than stated above, given that a significant percentage of all slaves arriving in the peninsula came through Portugal (Stella 2000a, 64–79). There seems to be general agreement that, at least with regard to the Spanish kingdoms, it is possible to discern three distinct stages: the sixteenth century, during which the importation of sub-Saharan slaves was steadily growing in importance; the seventeenth century, or at least its first six decades, when the vast majority of all slaves in the Iberian peninsula were of sub-Saharan origin; and from the closing decades of that century until the end of the eighteenth, when the number of slaves arriving in the peninsula was greatly reduced, and virtually negligible. In Portugal, the preponderance of slaves of sub-Saharan origin was evident much earlier and can be traced back to the first decades of the sixteenth century.

In both Portugal and Spain, slavery was essentially an urban phenomenon. In the rural regions of the peninsula, it seems that the presence of slaves was rarely noted, although our knowledge of rural slavery is still relatively scant (Andújar Castillo 1999, 8). There were major concentrations of black slaves in the large Mediterranean and Atlantic port cities, in Alentejo, Algarve, and Andalucia, and the frontier regions of between Portugal and Castile (for instance, in Extremadura). The presence of slaves was especially notable in some of the most important urban centres in both monarchies: the capitals, Lisbon and Madrid, the city of Évora, where the Portuguese kings and their court often took up residence in the sixteenth century; Lagos and Portimão, in the Algarve; Seville, the great commercial hub, with links to other parts of Europe, north Africa, and the Americas; as well as Cadiz, Valencia, Granada, Barcelona, and other large cities. The case of Barcelona is notable because in the transition from the Mediterranean model of slavery—when the majority of slaves were from the Mediterranean region—to the Atlantic model, marked by the preponderance of enslaved Africans, Barcelona’s role as a major Iberian slave market declined, and its place was taken by Valencia.

The presence of black slaves in many of these cities was mentioned by contemporary observers, some of whom were astonished by the sight. In 1533, the Flemish humanist Nicolaus Clenardus, recently arrived from northern Europe, was immediately taken aback: “I had scarcely set foot in Évora, when I felt myself transported to an infernal city: there were blacks everywhere.” A few months later, he was in Lisbon: “The place is swarming with blacks. All services are performed by captive blacks and moors. ... It seems to me that in Lisbon there are more male and female slaves than Portuguese of free status” (cit. Cerejeira 1926, Vol. I: 253, 258). Almost
50 years later, an anonymous Italian traveller assured his readers that “the slaves are so numerous, mainly Ethiopes [sub-Saharan Africans], that the cities resemble chessboards, for there are as many whites as blacks” (Marques 1987, 127–245).

These reports are, however, somewhat exaggerated. Based on the first population count in Lisbon, carried out in 1551 on the orders of the city’s archbishop, its total population of just around 100,000 inhabitants included 9,950 slaves—around 10% (Oliveira 1987, 101). Meanwhile, based on studies of the sixteenth-century baptismal records of some parishes of the Portuguese capital, the number of baptised slaves as a proportion of the total was generally below 10%, the only exception being the parish of Santa Cruz do Castelo, where there was a high concentration of aristocratic households. In other words, for sixteenth-century Lisbon at least, this percentage seems like a reasonably accurate estimate. In the rest of the country, these percentages were attained or even surpassed in some towns in the Alentejo or the Algarve (the southern half of Portugal), but even in these regions the overall average was lower: 8.4% in the Algarve, and 6.4% in the Lower Alentejo (Fonseca 2010, 90–100). In the centre and north of Portugal the numbers, as far as they are known, were significantly lower. Most of the sources for these regions point to a steady decline in the number of slaves over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, due to lower numbers of arrivals, combined with high mortality and low fertility among the slave population. It therefore seems reasonable to estimate that

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Image 12.1 View of a square with the King’s Fountain in Lisbon, ca. 1570–1588.  
Chafariz d’el Rey in the Alfama District  
Source: Courtesy Associação de Coleções—The Berardo Collection
slaves made up between 3% and 5% of the population of Portugal in the sixteenth century, and between 3% and 4% in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, albeit by then including slaves and freedmen.

The situation in the peninsular kingdoms of the Spanish monarchy resembled that of Portugal in many respects. However, unlike in Portugal, the majority of slaves were found not in the capital, Madrid, but in some of the other large cities. In Seville, for instance, the 1565 census recorded the presence of just over 6,000 slaves, or 13.5% of the city’s population (Lobo Cabrera 2001, 543). In the case of Seville, slaves of sub-Saharan origin were already the most numerous in the early sixteenth century (61.4% in 1500–1525) and became even more preponderant in subsequent decades (Pérez García and Fernández Chaves 2015, 720–722). In the sixteenth century, there were also significant numbers of slaves (around 5–10% of the total population) in other Spanish cities, such as Valencia—the most important slave-market, surpassed only by Lisbon in the peninsula—Mallorca, the Canary Islands, Malaga, Cadiz, Caceres, and many others. In Cadiz, for which detailed studies exist, the number of baptised slaves as a proportion of the total of those who received the sacrament ranged from more than 15% in the first half of the seventeenth century, 12% in the second half, and less than 4% in the eighteenth century (Morgado García 2013, 127–147). Scholars have made the general distinction between Andalusia, which had the greatest concentration of slaves, other regions where slaves were less numerous but still present in significant numbers—Valencia and Madrid, once the latter became the seat of the royal court, as well as Toledo, Valladolid, Murcia, and Extremadura—and the rest of Spain where few if any slaves were to be found (Periáñez Gómez 2008, 37–38).

With regard to slave owners and the average number of slaves per household, there were broad similarities between Portugal and the Spanish peninsular kingdoms. In the large cities, where the majority of slaves were concentrated, most of the slave owners were members of the nobility (beginning with the royal family), sections of the clergy, religious institutions, royal officials, and merchants. Outside the main urban centres, landowners stood out as the major slave owners. However, slave ownership was not restricted to certain social groups, for there were slave owners among the humbler classes, and even some former slaves. On the other hand, it was relatively uncommon for an individual to own large numbers of slaves, and those who did were almost invariably nobles. In 1563, the Duke of Braganza, Dom Teodósio, left 48 slaves in his testament; in 1728, there were 15 slaves in the household of the fidalgo Aires de Saldanha de Albuquerque; and, in 1754 the Count of Ribera Grande, Dom José da Cámara, had 23 slaves in his service. These numbers in turn seem relatively modest in comparison with some of the Castilian nobility: in 1507, the Duke of Medina Sidonia, Don Juan de Guzmán, had 248 slaves, and a few decades later, Doña Catalina de Ribera, Duchess de Medinaceli, had 93 (Fonseca 2010, 226). In a 1720–1721 sample of 24 rural and urban southern Portuguese parishes, out of a total of 4,850 hearths, and 18,950 inhabitants, only 183 households (3.8%) possessed slaves. Of these, 65% owned no more than one or two slaves, and only 15 individuals (8%) owned six slaves or more (Caldeira 2017, 126). In the Canaries, 85% of slave owners had between one and five slaves, and only 1.3% owned between 15 and 23 slaves (Lobo Cabrera and Díaz Hernández 1984, 234). In the case of Extremadura, almost 55% of the
owners had only one slave, and less than 5% owned between 5 and 9 (Periáñez Gómez 2008, 230).

Although slaves were to be found in nearly all occupations, the majority of enslaved women as well as some men, in both rural and urban settings, worked as domestic servants. This predominantly domestic nature of slave labour may explain why in the Iberian peninsula, unlike in the colonial context, enslaved women were more numerous than men. However, it should be kept in mind that during the Ancien Régime, unlike today, domestic service comprised a much wider range of duties and tasks, including some that were productive in character. In the urban centres, many slaves, known as the “escravos de soldo” or “esclavos de ganancia” (“wage-earning slaves”), did not work directly for their masters. They placed themselves in the service of third parties, in principle earning a salary comparable to that of free workers. The difference was that these wages belonged to the slave’s owner, who in turn spent only a small fraction of the money for the sustenance of the one who had earned it with her or his labour. There was thus a symbiosis between slavery and wage labour, but with servile status being more significant.

It was under these conditions that many enslaved women were employed as water carriers and water sellers, and in the removal of all kinds of waste. In the case of the Spanish peninsular kingdoms, enslaved women also worked in the manufacturing sector (especially textiles and leather), in taverns and inns, and as agricultural workers (García Barranco 2011, 8). Many slaves also worked as stevedores in the ports, warehouses, and marketplaces, or for instance in Lisbon’s royal industrial facilities, such as the tercenas shipyard (which housed a foundry for cannons, anchors, and other paraphernalia of naval warfare), the Ribeira das Naus shipyard, the rope yard (where the rigging for the ships was made), the grain mills and ovens of the Vale de Zebro (where the ship’s biscuit was prepared and baked). The slaves who belonged to landowners were used in agricultural work but always alongside free labourers (servants). There are no known cases of farm enterprises that relied exclusively on slave labour, and those where slaves outnumbered servants were rare.

Although all slaves suffered the brutalities and indignities of slavery, the ordeals of enslaved women were greater insomuch as many of them were also victims of sexual violence. Raped repeatedly, sometimes by other slaves or free servants, but in most cases by their masters, or not infrequently used as concubines by owners belonging to all social strata, enslaved women were captives in a double sense: as forced labourers and sexual slaves. The church synod of Badajoz, convened in 1671, acknowledged as much, electing to impose harsh sanctions on those who “cohabited with their slaves”, because the situation was becoming intolerable: “some are bought for the purpose of being misused, while others consent to being concubines in the interests of the children which they bear to [their owners] … and there are those who keep them like cattle on a farm and use them as such” (cit. Periáñez Gómez 2008, 96; García Barranco 2011). As in other territories of the Iberian monarchies, a study of marriage records reveals that the majority of slaves and freedmen and women married persons of the same colour and status. Further proof of this is the number of births out of wedlock, with a high proportion of illegitimate children born to enslaved women, all, or nearly all of them of mixed blood. Many of these offspring were the result of the sexual exploitation of enslaved women, including those owned
by the clergy. The situation was no different in Portugal, where studies have shown a similarly high rate of illegitimacy.

The growing presence of slaves from sub-Saharan Africa led to changes in the language used to describe slaves, a process sometimes referred to as the Africanisation of slavery, or the convergence of “African” and “slave”. The gradual disappearance of slaves from other regions left the African continent as the only source of slaves. Consequently, the terms black and slave became confounded, almost synonymous, in the Iberian world. The very title of a play, associated with the playwright Antonio Mira de Amescua and probably written in the 1620s, clearly shows this link: *The Best Master’s Black* (El negro del mejor amo), a work that could have been titled *The Best Master’s Slave*.

Moreover, alongside this process of the Africanisation, or blackening of the slave, there were changes in the very meaning of slavery itself, or the rationale for its existence, as well as intense reflection on the character of black slaves, and, more importantly, the possibility of the future integration of their descendants into the Luso-Hispanic communities. On this point, various Iberian theologians and writers saw the alleged backwardness of the blacks as the direct consequence of slavery, rather than the result of inherent nature and characteristics of these people. On both sides of the Atlantic there were those who argued that the only obstacle to the advancement and social integration of the Africans was their slave status. If they were only offered a means to attaining their freedom, and receive an education, the Africans would show the same intellectual capacity for progress, and the same aptitude for becoming fully fledged citizens of Iberian communities as other groups.

Belief in the Africans’ greater capacity for conversion to Christianity led some writers to contrast them positively with indigenous Americans, Jews, Muslims, and even European protestants, because, unlike all of the latter, the Africans were seen as a blank slate, with no beliefs prior to their acceptance of Christianity, and thus more immune to backsliding. This enthusiasm was expressed in the words of Pellicer de Tovar, for whom the Africans were “docile sheep and hearts of wax upon which the mark of truth is easily impressed and remains indelible thereafter”. Pellicer and many others also speculated on the Africans’ potential to become civilised, their ability to learn the Spanish language, so that their children may be educated with those of Indians and Spaniards. The Africans were still “uncultured and crude”, but this was due to being uneducated, and not because they lacked the natural capacity for improvement (Pellicer de Tovar 1649, fols. 14v–15r, 24r). The Jesuit José de Acosta was even more emphatic, arguing that education rather than natural characteristics determined the progress of peoples and nations, and pointed to the Africans as evidence:

> There seems to be nothing baser than the descendants of the Ethiopes; yet even they, if educated in a palace, become so alert, quick-witted, and capable of performing any task, so that if it were not for their colour, they would be taken for one of us.

(Acosta 1984, Vol. 1, 151)

There were, especially in the theatre, slaves who demonstrated the potential for improvement once they found themselves living among Christians in Spain.
or Portugal. However, these enlightened individuals were the exception, and far from being representative of most of the African population—or those of African descent—in the peninsula. The majority, both real and fictional individuals, were subjected to deeply paternalistic attitudes, and overwhelmingly negative public perceptions. In theatrical works, poetry, novels, and many other literary genres, the impression given to audience and readers was one of slaves whose speech was unintelligible, and who could not be assimilated, individuals who were not only fully conscious of their status as slaves, but above all of their “natural inferiority” manifest in their skin colour, their slave condition, but also their repeated failure to overcome their primitive nature. One of the most consistent features of the portrayals of African slaves in Iberian literary works was their infantilisation: the blacks were like overgrown children, unable to think for themselves, to think about the future, or exercise self-control.

For the most part authors gave a voice to the African slave not to affirm their humanity and their potential for progress, but in order to ridicule them, and render them spokespeople for their own inferiority. Hence the proliferation in many literary and theological works of a type of black character who has not only internalised their inferiority, but who also makes it public—not least through the external markers of this inferiority: skin colour, physical ugliness compared with the inhabitants of the peninsula, their inability to express themselves in Castilian or Portuguese, and their incapacity for articulating complex ideas—not as the product of their civil status as slaves but rather of their natural state in some sense, and thus unchangeable (Morgado García 2013, 25–50; Fra Molinero 1995, 2014; and Tinhorão 1988, 233–269). There are few more striking examples of this negative image, and its persistence over centuries, than the poem by Francisco de Quevedo, “Boda de negros” (1610s), and the “Nueva relación y curioso romance, que se refiere la celebridad, galanteo y acaso de una boda de negros que se ejecutó en la ciudad del Puerto de Santa María” (written in the late 1700s and published in the first decades of the nineteenth century), both of which rank among the most profoundly derogatory texts written about black Africans.

Despite this overview of the situation in the Iberian peninsula, it should not be concluded that slaves had no agency, that they were incapable of defending themselves and their rights. In contrast to the colonies, where their numbers were far greater, slaves in the Iberian peninsula were far more likely to defend their rights in the courts. The Siete Partidas, but also church doctrine, stipulated that slaves had the right to raise complaints against masters who abused them or exploited them beyond legally sanctioned limits. Slaves were also permitted to marry, a right that could not be legally denied by either masters or the authorities, ecclesiastical or secular. We know that there was a great deal of opposition to these marital unions, as well as slave family formation, but historians have also shown that slaves fiercely defended these legal rights (McKinley 2016). One of the most revealing texts in this regard is Entremés de los negros (1602), by Simón Aguado, whose slave protagonists Dominga and Gaspar are able to marry and establish a family despite vehement resistance from their respective owners, and they did so with the help of the slave community (Martín Casares 2010). As Stella has shown by publishing a diverse collection of judicial and legal documents, slaves—and especially enslaved women—were quite adept at defending their rights in the Spanish courts (Stella 2000b).
Escape was one of the more desperate acts of resistance against the arbitrary power of masters. Although fraught with risk (the punishment was severe) and not very likely to succeed—in the peninsula at any rate—thousands of slaves nevertheless attempted to attain freedom this way over the centuries.

In contrast to the colonial territories, where slaves and freedmen played an important role in regional and local defence, very little is known about the formation of slave and freedmen militias in the Iberian context. Although scattered, oblique references to such units in Cadiz and elsewhere have surfaced, but historians have yet to uncover documents pertaining directly to these militias, and there has been no concerted attempt to verify their existence (Morgado García 2013, 314). On the other hand, the existence of black or mestizo lay religious confraternities is well-attested in many cities with a significant slave population, especially in the south of Portugal and Spain. Some of these were the result of initiatives emanating from the secular or ecclesiastical authorities, but many others were the product of efforts by “black men” themselves. The oldest, the Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Homens Pretos (Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary of Black Men), was founded in Lisbon in 1460. Like other such associations of laymen, their purpose was incorporate its members into the civic religious rituals that were such a prominent feature of the early modern period. But they also served as mutual aid societies among their members, assuming as one if its main tasks the defence of the interests of “enslaved brothers”, such as securing their liberty, especially for those who were being mistreated (Mira Caballos 2014; Lahon, 2003; Fonseca, 2016). For the majority of Africans, and especially the slaves, religion was a palliative amid the daily struggle against a strange and almost invariably hostile world. While forms of magical ritualism and religious syncretism flourished—and were viewed with great suspicion by the Inquisition—more orthodox forms of Catholicism also undeniably took root. The fact that songs and dances of African origin were incorporated into some of the religious festivities, with the consent of some sectors of the Catholic Church, at least partly explains this adherence to the official faith. These songs and dances were a central feature of African sociability, and in towns with significant populations of African descent, it was not uncommon for public squares and open spaces to become gathering places, transformed, on Sundays and holy days, with the colours and sounds of Africa.

**MANUMISSION AND INTEGRATION**

According to Debra Blumenthal, slavery in the Iberian peninsula in the Middle Ages was “an institution regulated by a well-defined set of legal procedures”, and the same may be said about slavery in the early modern period (Blumenthal 2000, 24). One of these procedures, more or less regulated, was the manumission of the slave. Only the slave’s owner had the power to release him or her from servitude through manumission (alforría), either in testamentary dispositions or the granting of a “carta (letter) de alforria”. There were many possible motives for granting manumission—a voluntary decision by the master to free his slaves, the purchase of his or her own liberty by the slave, the demand by a slave for the fulfilment of a promise of liberty, or because of abuse suffered, or if the slave could prove that he or she had been unjustly enslaved. In Valencia, from the early fifteenth century to the early sixteenth, Blumenthal has located 82 documents in which slaves were petitioning for their
freedom. Half of these were from slaves who denied the legitimacy of their enslavement; the rest were slaves attempting to prove that their masters had promised to grant their freedom and had failed to do so (Blumenthal 2009, ch. 6).

The path to obtaining manumission was fraught with obstacles, as numerous studies have shown. Even in cases where masters had elected to free their slaves, this decision would frequently be disputed by the relatives, and the slaves in question were forced to take the matter to court. In many other cases it was the slaves themselves who took the initiative, but this usually involved having to purchase one’s freedom—and it took some time to raise the required sums. On the other hand, manumission was often a poisoned chalice, for instance when the master chose to free his slave once the latter was too frail or too old as a means of getting rid of one who could no longer work. The slaves belonging to the king or the royal family were most likely to be manumitted. On her death in 1578, Catherine of Austria, widow of the Portuguese king João III, left all her slaves “free and manumitted”, while in his testament, king Pedro II (1683–1706) likewise ordered all his slaves to be freed.

It is not easy to ascertain the number of slaves freed in Portugal in the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. A census of all the moradores (householders) of Lisbon was commissioned in 1565 for the purposes of levying an extraordinary tax (from which the nobility and the clergy were exempt, and therefore not included in the count). Among a total of 15,056 potential taxpayers, there were 262 black and mulatto heads of household (1.7%), not all of them necessarily former slaves, concentrated in some of the city’s poorest parishes (Coelho 1999, 157). It is safe to assume that this percentage only increased over the next two centuries, certainly in the great urban centres, which freedmen were overwhelmingly drawn to, and Lisbon in particular.

On the other hand, Stella and other scholars have demonstrated that only a tiny minority of slaves ever won their freedom. All the studies thus far have shown that slaves invariably outnumbered freedmen, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the eighteenth century, the total number of slaves was in decline, as well as the number of those who owned at least one slave, but the number of freedmen was always relatively low. In Cadiz, for instance, in the first half of the eighteenth century, no more than 5% of all testators who owned slaves granted them manumission (Morgado García 2013, 223). If other types of sources are taken into account, and not only slave-owners’ testaments, it may be that the number of freedmen was higher than 5%, especially in the eighteenth century. In the case of one region of Extremadura, fewer than 200 slaves were freed even though several thousand are known to have lived there during the early modern period (Mira Caballos 2016, 301). However, in Cadiz, for which a number of studies exist, at least 642 letters of manumission were issued in the period from 1600 to 1750—441 in the seventeenth century, and 201 in the first half of the eighteenth, which translates into 13% of all purchases of slaves for the seventeenth century, and as high as 80% for the eighteenth century, when the total number of slaves had been reduced to virtually nothing (Morgado García 2013, 287; Periáñez Gómez 2008, 457, 469, 488, 492–496). Elsewhere, the situation was somewhat different, such as for instance in the Canaries, where as many as 29% of slaves were granted their freedom, the majority of them women, although it’s unclear how many of them were of sub-Saharan
African origin. At the time, freedmen of all ethnic origins made up around 3% of the total population (Lobo Cabrera 1983, 43).

Integration, in terms of being considered as one among the many peoples that made up the population of the Iberian peninsula, possessing the same rights as other members of the communities where they happened to live, was a remote and unlikely prospect. The reasons for this were many. First, despite the letter of manumission, and not unlike a freedman in ancient Rome, the “manumitted slave” was not exactly a free man or woman; rather, according to the royal Ordinances, he or she continued to owe respect and gratitude to the old master, who in turn had the power, in theory at least, to return the freed slave to his former status (Ordenações Filipinas IV, 68; Periñez Gómez 2014). Indeed, local ordinances often regulated not only the public life of slaves, but also of the recently freed, limiting their freedom of movement.

More important was the fact that they never stopped being slaves or considered as such. In the eyes of contemporaries, a former slave never ceased to be one, because servitude was impressed on the spirit, and on the body through skin colour. In many regions, the majority of freed slaves were mulatto women, while black women or men were least numerous (Periñez Gómez 2014, 136). According to Aurelia Martín Casares, “emancipated slaves were fatally stigmatised by their past”. In virtually all the documents where they are mentioned, a freedman is referred to as one “who is free and was a slave, or recently freed from slavery” and this circumstance is noted in many other cases, even with regard to individuals who were born free to parents who had once been enslaved (Martín Casares 2005, 252; Periñez Gómez 2008, 492).

It is precisely because of this marginalisation, the exclusion of freedmen from most occupations and public offices, which makes it so difficult to reconstruct the lives of these individuals. Only when they ran afoul of the law, or when freedmen (or their descendants) filed complaints or petitions of their own, they left traces that historians are able to follow up (Periñez Gómez 2008, 492). More than anything, it was their past as slaves, or the descendants of slaves, that conditioned the generally wretched lives of freedmen, especially men. To be sure, some managed to integrate, and even to become persons of note in their towns and cities, while others married or mixed with slaves and freedmen from other regions—North Africa, former Moriscos—and thus rendered themselves biologically “invisible” (Lobo Cabrera 1983, 17–18). Meanwhile, blacks in Cadiz filed petitions demanding access to various occupations, arguing that as a result of being marginalised they were driven to rely on public charity, or else turn to crime. King Charles III himself sent a letter to the city’s governor ordering him to

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\text{protect and support the blacks by enabling them to gain admission to all the occupations [that exist] in the republic [city], so that through their labour they may earn their daily sustenance and thus abstain from idleness, begging, and other attendant vices.}\n\]

(Morgado García 2013, 314)

Although freedmen faced many obstacles in trying to integrate into society, there were exceptions: the New Christian merchant António Gomes de Elvas purchased and subsequently freed the slave Manuel, who was said to have been
his half-brother, for he was the product of a relationship between António’s father and another master’s slave. Manuel was allowed to use the family name, and in due course became a prosperous international merchant and banker in his own right, receiving in 1606 the title of a fidalgo of the Royal Household from King Philip III (Abecasis 2017, 57–61). Likewise, at the court of the sixteenth-century Portuguese King João III, the black former slave João de Sá, celebrated for his witticisms, was granted the title of cavaleiro (knight) that enabled him to ride on horseback through the streets of Lisbon, wearing the habit of the Military Order of Santiago. There were many other examples of illustrious black men and women—individuals like

![Image 12.2](image)

Image 12.2 A seventeenth-century engraving representing a Black man called Juan de Alba, represented as a knight of a military order. He is the main character of the following piece: Romance de los valerosos hechos de el Valiente Negro en Flandes, llamado Juan de Alva (Seville, Herederos de Tomás López de Haro, en calle de Génova [ca. 1690])
Source: Private collection, Madrid, Spain
Juan Latino (freedman and poet), Juan de Pareja (freedman and painter), Antonio Machuca (freedman and celebrated entrepreneur), Elena/o de Céspedes (famous in her own time not only as a free woman, but also for having been accused of witchcraft and pretending to be a hermaphrodite), or Teresa Juliana de Santo Domingo (freedwoman and nun). Finally, the children of slave owners and their female slaves, some of whom were mentioned above, found it much easier to integrate.

In any case, these were exceptional cases. Many of the “ordinary” freedmen chose to stay in the service of their former masters or their descendants, performing the same functions as before, but for a salary. A popular theatrical work published in 1787, titled “O contentamento dos pretos” (“The Contentment of the Blacks”), showed a slave couple at the point of receiving their freedom, joyful because they would be allowed to continue serving their masters, thenceforth as servants (Novo e devertido entremez 1787). When this was not an option, integration was easiest for those who married free individuals, or who were skilled in some craft. The rest found it extremely difficult to find paid work, and many flocked to the great urban centres, where they survived by doing odd jobs, through begging, or petty crime.

Poor, uprooted, and vulnerable, freedmen and women were seen by the dominant society as drunks, thieves, or prostitutes, as evinced by the documents and the literature of the period. In a dramatic work by Gil Vicente, Clérigo da Beira (1526), the freed black character is said to be an irremediable thief. There are cases of owners who apologise for not freeing their slaves because that would mean condemning them to prison or to the gallows, and several Portuguese municipal governments restricted the settlement of freedmen without a fixed occupation in their territory (Caldeira 2017, 406–407).

The formation of stable families was no easier for freedmen than it had been when they were slaves. In Cadiz, for instance, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some 1,800 marriages were recorded in which at least one of the partners was a slave, while 1,126 children of slaves were baptised, which means an average of only 0.6 children per married couple. Many of the children born to slave fathers or mothers, and to freedmen or freedwomen, were born out of wedlock (Morgado García 2013, 231–240). It has also been established that fertility rates among enslaved women were low, even in relation to the average, probably no more than one or two children at most. One of the explanations that has been put forward for this phenomenon is that the vast majority of freed slaves were either very young, or very old, and in both cases the available evidence indicates that their fertility was lower in comparison with other demographic groups (Martín Casares 1999, ch. 9).

The number of slaves sharply declined from the middle of the eighteenth century. This was clearly the case in Portugal, where the laws of 1761 and 1773 introduced by the Marquis of Pombal, King José I’s minister, resulted in the rapid fall in the number of slaves and a corresponding, albeit temporary, rise in the number of freed blacks and mestizos. At a time when the importation of new slaves into Portugal was already significantly reduced, the law of 19 September 1761 strictly forbade new arrivals. Thus, all the “blacks and black women” brought thenceforth from America, Africa, and Asia would be considered free immediately upon their arrival in any of the kingdom’s ports, without the need for a letter of manumission or any other formality. On the other hand, the law of 16 January 1773 was a kind of “law of the free womb”, although it went even further, granting liberty not only to those
born to slave mothers, but also those whose slave status derived from at least their great-grandparents. The only ones who remained slaves were those unable to prove this ancestry, but their condition was not passed onto their progeny. According to this legislation, former slaves were to be considered “suitable for all offices, honours, dignities, without the distinguishing mark of Freedmen, which the superstition of the Romans introduced into their customs, and which Christian union and civil society today renders intolerable” (Silva 1829, 640). The law was no doubt well-intended, but its impact was limited. The number of slaves in Spain also fell as a result of the changes in Portugal, but the number of freedmen was also falling at this time, in many cases reduced to nothing.

CONCLUSION

In Portugal, the law of 1773 did not signal the end of slavery. Aside from those who were not freed as a consequence of this law (whom their owners were allowed to keep as slaves while they lived), other slaves arrived as contraband or following special dispensations, as happened in 1822 with the return of many Portuguese following the Brazilian declaration of independence. Officially, slavery was prohibited in Portugal in 1869, at the same time as in the overseas territories, although by then there were scarcely any slaves left in the metropolis. The situation in Spain was very similar. Although a minority of the Spanish elite seem to have taken an interest in the ongoing debates around abolition of slavery in England, and at various points in the nineteenth century there was some discussion in the Spanish parliament on the issue of abolition—initially of the slave trade, and then slavery itself—slavery in peninsular Spain was not officially abolished until 1837, although by that point, as in Portugal, there were few slaves left (Morgado García 2013, 50–66; Galván Rodríguez 2014).

The nineteenth century also witnessed the progressive disappearance of the population of freed black Africans in Portugal. The mestiços, most of them the product of relations between black women and white men, when they were recognised by their fathers were absorbed by the dominant society through a process of real or symbolic “whitening”. Other factors may help explain the disappearance of the rest of the African community, or those of African ancestry. A perhaps unlikely source provides a snapshot of this community: the burial register of one of the largest cemeteries in Lisbon, the eastern cemetery (Alto de São João), in the period from 1840 to 1900 (Neto 1994, 1–14). During this period, 738 black and (only) 57 mestiços were buried there. The most common type of burial confirms the image of poverty that characterised this community: only two individuals were laid to rest in vaults, and 93 in individual graves. The remaining 700, that is to say, more than 88%, were buried in common graves. When the occupations of the deceased are mentioned, we find that they are not very different from those performed by slaves. In the case of men, 78 (29.5%) were servants and cooks, 63 (23.9%) were manual workers and wage labourers, 18 (6.8%) beggars and vagrants. With regard to women, 190, or 72.5%, were most likely servants, followed by beggars and vagrants, 45 (17.2%).

There is yet another revealing number: of all the black women and mestiças buried in this cemetery, 74.4% (three in four) died single. Since many of them were domestic servants, this would seem to be the result of pressure from employers,
and although being single was not an impediment to having children (even by one’s employer), the fertility rate among these women was low. Combined with a very high mortality rate (greater than among the white population), it is hardly surprising that the population of African descent, not being replenished by new arrivals from abroad, suffered a precipitous decline. Until the middle of the nineteenth century a brotherhood of black men still existed in Lisbon, and festivities invoking the kings of the Congo were still being organised. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, despite the colonial empire, black Africans had almost disappeared from the streets of the Portuguese capital, and there remained only vestiges of small African communities in two or three rural towns in southern Portugal.

No such accurate information about the descendants of freedmen exists for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Spain. However, there is every indication that most of them died without leaving descendants, whether black nor mestizo. Others, as in the case of Portugal, ended up being absorbed into the white population, thus bringing to an end the memory of the presence of black Africans in Spain (Herzog 2012). This was already the assumption at the beginning of the nineteenth century, during the debates in the Cortes of Cádiz (1810–1812). In that assembly, the peninsular representatives claimed that all the “nations” living in the homeland had mixed until each one had been integrated into the one Spanish nation.

However, even if “memory” of the Africans in Spain had disappeared, the socio-demographic reality was a little different, at least at the local level. Communities of black Africans were still to be found in some areas of Andalusia, for instance. These were undoubtedly smaller than in previous periods, but still enduring. In Seville, for example, a “Cofradía de los Negritos” (Confraternity of the blacks), albeit reduced in size, continued to exist throughout the nineteenth century. This was even more evident in the peninsula of Huelva, especially the area of Gibraleón, where communities of blacks survived until at least the 1960s, and where the process of miscegenation could be observed (Larrea 1952; Márquez Reviriego 1966). Yet despite the history of the presence of black Africans, until the present day at least there has been no attempt to study the African contribution to the creation of the Hispanic identity.

NOTE

1 Translated by Igor Knezevic.

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