

Review of: "Blacks in the Middle Ages – What About Racism in the Past? Literary and Art-Historical Reflections"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Albrecht Classen is a renowned professor of medieval literature at the University of Arizona, and his body of work spans an impressive gamut, encompassing German literature from the High Middle Ages to the sixteenth century and beyond. He has also written on ideas of wisdom, communication, and community in the Medieval and Early Modern periods, in addition to ideas of religious tolerance and the "Global Middle Ages."

The article under review here is therefore well within his wheelhouse. Classen takes a bold step in his subject: the perception of Black people in Medieval literature and works of art. This has been a subject of intense debate as of late, particularly within the circles of literary scholars and historians of the Middle Ages. Classen rightly points to the impact of Geraldine Heng's 2018 publication *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* on this field of inquiry, and states that in his article, he wishes to contribute further examples for future discourse among scholars. The ultimate goal of the piece is, in some ways, to challenge recent scholarly findings, revealing "that long before the modern age there was already an alternative discourse to embrace at least individual Blacks as equals within the courtly and religious context [of the period that Classen's chapter examines]."

The article is a straightforward reading of various selected texts from courtly literature in the Middle Ages, including Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and the Middle Dutch *Romance of Moriaen*, supplemented by a consideration of Black people in medieval manuscript illuminations and works of art from the thirteenth to sixteenth century.

Overall, Classen's selection of readings reveal a quite interesting counterpoint to the perception among some scholars of an inherently racist Middle Ages. The paper exposes the fallacy in applying a blanket idea of racism as it developed in the nineteenth century, particularly through its examination of the depictions of People of Color (POC) through the lens of courtly literature. Classen shows (rightly, in the opinion of the reviewer), that authors in the Middle Ages possessed surprisingly nuanced views with regard to race. This is particularly demonstrated in his analysis of mixed-race figures in the stories of *Parzival* and *Moriaen*. For those such as myself, who are not literary scholars but are trained medievalists, the article serves as a nice point of departure for delving into the deeper problems of conceptions of race in the past. Of course, Classen does not appear to be dismantling or discrediting the work of Heng, but lives up to the stated promise in the introduction of the piece: to provide further evidence to the discourse and to highlight the nuanced views of race held by people in the Middle Ages.

What I personally found interesting with the article was the way in which Classen supplements his readings with an

analysis of visual depictions of Black people in manuscripts that are not explicitly literary objects. This is the case, for example, with Conrad Keyser's *Bellifortis* (1405) and the well-known depiction of the Queen of Sheba, in addition to the thirteenth-century book of games commissioned by Alfonso X *el Sabio*. Here, Classen adds to the nuance of the situation by showing how different sources likewise provide a neutral (i.e., not negative) depiction of Black people. The consideration of St Maurice, one of the most popular saints in the Middle Ages, lends credence to his claim. Maurice's Blackness would not appear to be a hindrance to his veneration among various groups of people in "Europe", and indeed one can take the examples provided by Classen here and supplement them with others.

For instance, the image of St Maurice was recorded by the Polish historian, Jan Długosz, on the battle standard of the Livonian Branch of the Teutonic Order. In this instance, it is clear that Maurice's status as a martyr and warrior (for the Christian faith) took precedence over the color of his skin. Indeed, this link between death and dying for the faith would resonate in a circle of a military monastic institution like the Teutonic Knights, in addition to the Knights Templar and Knights Hospitaller. Moreover, the "global" outlook of the Order in Prussia has also been analyzed recently through the lens of the reception of literary texts. Moreover, it would be interesting to compare the depiction of People of Color in medieval literary sources to the depiction of, say, non-Christian peoples on the "fringes" of Europe. I am thinking here, of course, of the Lithuanians. Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth century, they were described as *Saracens* and, in some chronicles, their rulers as *Satrapas*. In what ways does this add to the complexity emphasized by Classen here, and how could this be used in the extensive work conducted by Geraldine Heng? It would be interesting to see how these depictions, predominant in French literature, fit into this paradigm. Hopefully, this material can be of use to Classen as he grapples with these very important and relevant questions that not only concern how we view the past, but the state of the field of Medieval Studies today.

It is important to also note some areas where improvements might be made. Perhaps the most important concerns the link between Maurice and the Guild of the Blackheads, a trade fraternity of sorts that was founded in the early fifteenth century. While Classen is correct that a house of the brothers was in Riga and in Tallinn, there does not appear to be any evidence to support that there was such a fraternity in Lithuania. Some small typos and odd turns of phrase (e.g., *one the Black knight has died* instead of *once...*) do appear in the article, but a strength of Qeios is that the author is free to come in and make the corrections suggested by reviewers.

Overall, Classen has surely succeeded in meeting the goals outlined in this article. He's identified the key issues regarding critical, scholarly attempts to investigate ideas of race and racism in the Middle Ages and supplemented them with some very interesting examples. In my opinion, he does not dismiss the value of such work (which is an equally popular trend among scholars), but rather provides examples that highlight the complex nature of the topic. His thoroughness and diversity of materials and media, in addition to his clear and direct presentation of such a topic, deserve a lot of praise here.

Potentially interesting materials for the author of the article:

Chollet, Loïc (2019). *Les sarrasins du Nord: une histoire de la croisade balte par la littérature (XI^e–XV^e siècles)* (Neuchâtel: Editions Alphonse).

- Ekdahl, S. (1976). *Die Banderia Pruthenorum des Jan Długosz: eine Quelle zur Schlacht bei Tannenberg. Untersuchungen zu Aufbau, Entstehung und Quellenwert der Handschrift* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).
- Leighton, G. (2022). "How Global was Medieval Prussia? An Analysis of the *Barlaam and Josaphat* Manuscript of the Teutonic Knights at the Turn of the Fifteenth Century," *History. The Journal of the Historical Association* 107, no. 326: 507–25.
- Murray, A (2010). "The Saracens of the Baltic: Pagan and Christian Lithuanians in the Perception of English and French Crusaders to Late Medieval Prussia," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41, no. 4: 413–29.
- Paravicini, W (2020). *Adlig Leben im 14. Jahrhundert. Weshalb sie fuhren? Die Preußensreisen des europäischen Adels*