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Images of ethnicity in later medieval Europe

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The Fixed and the Fluent

According to the Cistercian bishop Otto of Freising, in early times the Lombards, who had migrated from the northern island of Scandza to Pannonia and from there to Italy, had been a barbarous people. Lombard women had even twisted their hair around their chins, rigging themselves out with ‘long beards’ in order to fight alongside their men. However, according to Otto, by the middle of the twelfth century the Lombards had undergone a transformation from ‘crude, barbarous ferocity’ to elegance and manners. This felicitous change had, in Otto’s view, two potential causes. It was ‘perhaps from the fact that when united in marriage with the natives they begat sons who inherited something of the Roman gentleness and keenness from their mother’s blood’. In addition, they could ‘from the very quality of the country and climate, retain the refinement of the Latin speech and their elegance of manners’.¹

In Otto of Freising’s remark about the Lombards, we can clearly discern elements of the increasingly ‘biological mode of thinking’ from the twelfth century onwards.² As we saw in chapter 2, with the translation of Arabic medical treatises from the end of the eleventh century, differences between ethnic groups in Western Europe were no longer simply viewed as cultural, social or linguistic phenomena, but were slowly ‘embodied’.³ This ‘embodiment’ of cultural, social and religious differences was part of a broader development wherein natural philosophy and medicine pervaded all kinds of discussions about the nature of mankind as a *species*, stretching from questions about the material aspects of the resurrected body during the last days to whether Adam’s

1 Otto of Freising, *Gesta Friderici* II 14, ed. Schmale, 308, transl. Mierow, 127: ‘ex eo forsan, quod indigenis per conubia iuncti filios ex materno sanguine ac terre erisve proprietate aliquid Romane mansuetudinis et sagacitatis trahentes genuerint, Latini sermonis elegantiam morumque retinent urbanitatem’. Compare also the remark in the twelfth- or thirteenth- century ‘Descriptio Norfolciensium’ vs. 53-55: ‘Nam fructus optimos arbor nequissima / Nequit producere, nec mala patria / Benignos homines’, ed. 94, which possibly refers to the relation between territory and the character of its inhabitants.

2 Joseph Ziegler, ‘Physiognomy, Science, and Proto-racism 1200-1500’, in Eliav-Feldon, Isaac, and Ziegler (eds), *The Origins of Racism*, 181-200, here at 199.

3 See especially for the ‘embodiment’ of Jews in this period, Steven F. Kruger, *The Spectral Jew. Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe* (Minneapolis 2006) and Biller, ‘A “Scientific” View of Jews’; and chapter one in Epstein’s *Purity Lost*, ‘The Perception of Difference’.

complexion had turned to melancholy after the Fall.⁴ Likewise, in Otto of Freising's remark two distinct 'biological' notions about the Lombards' ethnicity are prevalent: the Lombards might inherit their intelligence and gentleness from their Roman mother's blood – through parental transmission resulting from intermarriage. Secondly, they have been subjected to the presumably temperate climate. As a result, their culture has changed from barbaric to elegant, both in speech and in manners.

Although Otto does not say so expressly, the Lombards' transformation was complexional – the Roman innate complexion and the fine air mentally modified the Lombards' initially crude disposition. In this chapter, I will address the question to which extent ethnic character formed by a person's complexion was viewed as fixed or fluent, subject to nature or nurture. I will discuss this in relation to two currents of thinking about ethnic character in medieval biological concepts of ethnicity. First, the concept in medical theory that man possessed an innate complexion (*complexio innata* or *radicalis*) passed down through parental transmission (semen and blood).⁵ This could imply that a person's disposition was 'fixed', although this certainly was not always the case. Secondly, the concept that a person had a natural complexion (*complexio naturalis*), which was changeable as a result of environmental influences such as climate, the seasons, and planetary conjunctions, but was also for example influenced by nutrition or even a person's profession. In this light, I will discuss the extent in which a person's complexion was viewed as fixed within a geographical space and religious context. What happened if a Saxon migrated to Italy? Were his physical appearance and character deemed to change? In addition, did the notion of free will and God's grace cut across biological constructs of the moral dispositions of groups? This must be examined in relation to the Christian concept that, although free will existed, salvation nonetheless required a specific soteriological 'essence'.⁶ This is important especially as the fixed or fluent nature of complexional dispositions and the influence of sin, free will and God's grace, opened up discussions whether for example a dark-skinned Muslim, living in the southern zone, was destined to retain a disposition of guile and lasciviousness if he were to convert to Christianity. Could he truly change? Some groups such as Jews were seemingly considered 'unchangeable', even upon conversion. Nonetheless, within Christian thinking there existed a notion of 'compulsory mutability': change was compulsory in order to achieve full humanness. On a broader level, we can point to a heightened interest in this period in the notion of nobility as a hereditary category, one of

4 See for discussions about material aspects of the resurrection of the body in the last days, Alain Boureau, 'Hérédité, erreurs et vérité de la nature humaine (XIIe-XIII siècles)', in Maaïke van der Lugt and Charles de Miramon (eds), *L'hérédité entre Moyen Âge et Époque modern. Perspectives historiques* (Florence 2008), 67-82 and Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Material Continuity, Personal Survival, and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in Its Medieval and Modern Contexts', in *History of Religions* 30 (1990), 51-85; for Adam's complexion in Paradise, Joseph Ziegler, 'Medicine and Immortality in Terrestrial Paradise', in Peter Biller and Joseph Ziegler (eds), *Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (York 2001), 201-242, and Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 78-80.

5 Ziegler, 'Physiognomy, Science', 193.

6 Denise Buell, 'Early Christian universalism and modern forms of racism', in Eliav-Feldon, Isaac and Ziegler, *Origins of Racism*, 109-131, here at 125-126.

'blood', or based on virtuous behaviour of individuals, receiving divine grace.⁷ Furthermore, in the twelfth century discussions crop up about the relation between complexional change, disease and sin. From the thirteenth century Jews, for example, were classified as melancholy as a result of the influence of planetary conjunctions, and as suffering from the *curse* of a 'flux of blood' or haemorrhoids.⁸

From the twelfth century onwards, there seems to have been an increasing tendency to typify individuals according to fixed stereotypes. In this period, the medical theory of complexions also underwent a development from Avicenna's relativist concept of a balanced complexion – unique to each individual – in which the qualities (hot and cold, wet and dry) were of overriding importance, to an emphasis on the predominant humour of the phlegmatic, sanguine, choleric and melancholy man and his ensuing temperament.⁹ These complexional types were described and discussed in numerous medical treatises, often with the title 'On Complexions', but also for example in the poem 'The Salernitan Regimen of Health'.¹⁰

In light hereof, the fixed or fluent nature of complexions addresses questions regarding the perceived capacity of individuals and members of ethnic groups to change, issues which closely touch the debate of racism, ethnic discrimination and ethnocentric sentiments. In recent years, two important studies have appeared addressing the very issue of early forms of racism in Europe. Benjamin Isaac's *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* and the collection of articles in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, stretching from antiquity to early modernity, both extensively examine how humoral and climate theory contributed to early ethnic group categorization in relation to theories of racism. This chapter is an additional contribution to this debate, centred on the notion of the fixed or fluent nature of complexions and ideas about the diversity of mankind. First, I will briefly set out the main issues of discussion in the on-going debate about whether or not there

7 Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (repr. 2005 New Haven and London), 143-158; Andrea A. Robligio, 'The Thinker as a Noble Man (bene natus) and Preliminary Remarks on the Medieval Concepts of Nobility', in *Vivarium* 44 (2006), 205-247, here at 207. In principle, nobility, as Robligio remarks, was in potential universally acquirable. However, with the embodiment of differences, a closing of the fluid boundaries would occur.

8 Biller, "'Scientific" View of Jews', 140-146. The fourteenth-century notion of the innate blood of Jewish conversi is unrelated; David Nirenberg, 'Was there race before modernity? The example of "Jewish" blood in late medieval Spain', in Eliav-Feldon, Isaac and Ziegler, *Origins of Racism*; for the immutability of Jews, cf. Kruger, *The Spectral Jew*; Jonathan M. Elukin, 'From Jew to Christian? Conversion and Immutability in Medieval Europe', in James Muldoon (ed.), *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville 1997), 171-189; see for the notion of a Christian ontology also especially Buell, 'Early Christian universalism'.

9 Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 98-123. Valentin Groebner, 'Complexio/Complexion: Categorizing Individual Natures, 1250-1600', in Lorraine Daston and Fernand Vidal (eds), *The Moral Authority of Nature* (Chicago and London 2004), 361-383, here at 365, 373 for the notion of an individual complexion in relation to the species. Groebner's discussion of the development of complexional types from the interior to exterior, focusing more on skin colour and marks, focuses on the period after 1250.

10 Ziegler, 'Physiognomy, science', 194; Lynn Thorndike, 'De complexionibus', in *Isis* 49 (1958), 398-403. A systematic examination of all 'Complexiones' treatises regarding remarks about ethnic groups is subject of future research.

existed any kind of ‘proto-racism’ in the Middle Ages in regards to environment and geography. This is useful as it may help clarify the role of biological thinking in constructions of ethnic identity and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in the Latin West.

The racism debate

According to medieval medical theory, complexions were both innate and mutable. For this reason, some scholars have downplayed the significance of complexions and climate theory in discussions of medieval forms of racist thinking. Robert Bartlett, for example, has argued that climate theory contradicts the ‘idea of a *constant* national character’.¹¹ After all, as character was determined geographically, migration would, among other things, eventually lead to physiognomic change. Accordingly, according to Bartlett, climate theory was incongruent with a belief in timeless descent groups of a fixed nature.¹² In *The Making of Europe*, discussing Regino of Prüm’s definition of ethnicity as ‘differing in descent, customs, language and law’, Bartlett thus remarked that medieval beliefs about ethnicity equated a ‘social construct rather than a biological datum’, and were almost entirely cultural.¹³ Joseph Ziegler, among others, has also stressed that the variability of a person’s complexional make-up generally excluded ethnic groups from discussions about the ideal temperate complexional type in physiognomic treatises before 1500, as these focused on individuality and variation in examining the relationship between bodily signs and behaviour.¹⁴ Accordingly, whereas racist theory is based on the premise that an ethnic group displays unchangeable and constant behavioural character traits, or in the words of George Frederickson, ‘permanent and unbridgeable’ differences, medieval ethnic complexional theory clearly was not.¹⁵ In addition, medieval ethnic thinking was far removed from the realms of nineteenth-century ‘scientific’ racist thinking. There was no theoretical framework of species and subspecies; as Charles de Miramon points out, taxonomies of the animal world were practical, not racial (dogs for example were classified as bloodhounds, watchdogs, scent hounds).¹⁶ According to medical theory, people were not grouped in

11 Bartlett, ‘Concepts of Race and Ethnicity’, 46. Emphasis is mine.

12 Nevertheless, in his biography of Gerald of Wales, Bartlett writes: ‘Another problem of climatic theory was its static nature; Gerald believed that the characteristics implanted by climate were permanent.’ Indeed, Gerald believed that the English and Britons, despite migration in ancient times, had retained their original character shaped by climate. Cf. Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, 203.

13 Bartlett, *The Making of Europe*, 197. In his contribution ‘Illustrating Ethnicity in the Middle Ages’, in Eliav-Feldon, Isaac and Ziegler (eds), *Origins of Racism*, 132-156, Bartlett also says very little about climate theory in relation to beliefs about ethnicity.

14 Idem, 182-187. Ziegler does however offer a few exceptions, such as references to Mongols or Tartars, menstruating Jews, or in the early sixteenth century, to the physiognomic traits of inhabitants of Italian cities.

15 Idem, 188 and Goldenberg, ‘Racism, color symbolism’, 92. See for example Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge 1987) and *The Idea of Race* (London 1977) for discussions of the meaning of ‘race’ in modernity.

16 Charles de Miramon, ‘Noble dogs, noble blood: the invention of the concept of race in the late Middle Ages’, in Eliav-Feldon, Isaac and Ziegler, *Origins of Racism*, 200-226, here at 204.

subspecies, but as a result of geographical location.¹⁷ Thus Albertus Magnus, discussing the differences between black and white falcons, distinguishes between a common form and accidentals such as colour caused by climate.¹⁸ Moreover, in contrast to modern forms of racism, the medieval biological language of ethnicity did not serve as a clearly defined ideological justification for systematic social, economic or religious discrimination.¹⁹

Conversely, Robert Bartlett, but also David Nirenberg and Benjamin Isaac have argued that the medieval notion of what constitutes ethnicity is rather similar to present-day notions of ethnicity or 'race' as a socio-cultural construct – people are *believed* to share characteristics which in fact are non-biological (genetic) constructs.²⁰ Nowadays, theoretical concepts of ethnicity rule out that a people are of 'common racial stock' – although this certainly does not rule out that in practice people have vague notions of a common ethnic descent, or shared ethnic character traits, or that they do not discriminate based on skin colour, ethnicity, religion or a combination of these (reacting to names, customs, appearance, dress, language, religion). This has led some medieval historians to even dispute the biological relevance of the word 'race'.²¹

In this chapter, the focus lies on medieval learned theories of ethnic dispositions within the context of climate and parental transmission. However, this is only one aspect in a much broader debate on the nature of racism. There is discussion about whether the term racism refers only to 'biological forms of racism' or 'scientific racism' – the nineteenth-century belief in hierarchically organized races with hereditary characteristics such as mental dispositions –, culturalist exclusionism – which disregards a hierarchy yet believes that peoples should develop separately –, or forms of political ideology. General consensus is that racism implies a simplification of the factors of collective behaviour, however, the question remains to which extent this simplification needs to be theorized 'biologically' in order to qualify as racism. Moreover, as David Nirenberg has argued, scientific racism itself is simply a product of culture, and perhaps just one form of a far more

17 Ziegler, 'Physiognomy, science', 195.

18 De Miramon, 'Noble dogs, noble blood', 205-206.

19 David Nirenberg, 'Was there race before modernity? The example of "Jewish" blood in late medieval Spain', in Eliav-Feldon, Isaac and Ziegler, *Origins of Racism*, 232-264, here at 235 for references to this discussion.

20 Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 17-38.

21 Bartlett accordingly argues that as race today is not a biological category (we could say not in academic theory as it is not based on genetics) – biological differences themselves 'not constituting race or ethnicity but part of the raw materials from which race and ethnicity can be construed' – ethnicity and race can be viewed as synonymous. Cf. Bartlett, 'Concepts of Race and Ethnicity', 41. William Chester Jordan also seems to define race and ethnicity as synonymous. See William Chester Jordan, 'Why Race', in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31/1 (2001), 165-173, as do most authors in this issue. See, however, the definitions of race in the Oxford English Dictionary, for example: 'A group of people, animals, or plants, connected by common descent or origin,' or a 'tribe, nation, or people, regarded as of common stock. In early use freq. with modifying adjective, as British race, Roman race, etc.'

persistent notion that cultures are reproduced (passed down) along genealogical lines.²² All racism does is to attempt to found discrimination of others on biological constructs.²³

As Ghassan Hage writes, the relationship between what racists are thinking and doing, between mental classification and practices, is still underresearched, with little attention paid to the practical function of knowledge – which for most people is far more important than any theoretical, academic construct or explanation.²⁴ ‘Biological discrimination’, as we could call it, exists beyond medieval or modernist scientific racism theories. Thus, a concoction might exist in peoples’ minds of perceptions of cultural traits, religious customs, dress, styling of hair, beards, skin colour, colour of eyes, language, first names and eating customs, mixing ‘biological marks of differentiation’ with cultural, social and religious differences. These perceptions might lead to feelings of superiority, discrimination of the other, exclusion, and in extreme cases, violence, or, on the other hand, inclusion, cooperation, and sharing. For that reason, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has said that remarks about features such as black or white skin colour by Isidore of Seville or Albertus Magnus *imply* racial typing, as skin colour is a biological fact – regardless of whether they are based upon any theoretical racial theory. Cohen accordingly stresses that ‘anatomical appearance, the medical composition of the body, and skin colour were in fact essential to the construction of difference throughout much of this period’.²⁵ For this reason, scholars today often dismiss a rigid denial of the existence of anti-Semitism in the Middle Ages (as opposed to anti-Judaism) on the grounds that anti-Jewish sentiment would merely reflect anti-religious feeling.²⁶ Persecution of for example Jews existed long before the scientific racism of Linnaeus and Cuvier, and was committed on social, cultural and religious grounds, yet clothed in a physiological language. In addition, religious differences are often clothed in terms of ethnicity, and categorized along ethnic lines, then and now, especially in Christian Western Europe with regards to Muslims and Jews.

For all these reasons, it is useful to take a different approach. Instead of debating whether medieval forms of biological thinking about ethnicity fit into any strict definition of hierarchically structured nineteenth-century ‘scientific racism’, it is more fruitful to examine on what ‘biological grounds’ ethnic character was founded in the Middle Ages, and to ask if this might lead to any form of discrimination, whether systematic or sporadic (which lies beyond the scope of this chapter). There are insufficient grounds to erase climatic and complexional theory – which were discussed *vulgariter* according to Albertus Magnus – from discussions about ‘biological’ ethnic stereotyping in the Late Middle Ages.²⁷ Instead of asking whether medieval biological theories were racist, we can

22 Nirenberg, ‘Race before modernity’, 233-239.

23 Idem, 235.

24 Hage, *White Nation*, 29-31 and notes 6 and 7; Martin Barker, *The New Racism* (London 1981).

25 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England’ in: *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31/1 (2001), 116.

26 See for example Robert Chazan, *Medieval Stereotypes and Modern Antisemitism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1997), ix-xiii.

27 Biller, ‘Proto-racial thought’, 179.

question to which extent those theories led to ideas, in medieval peoples' minds, about fixed or fluent character traits, and whether this had any consequences for people's behaviour towards one another.

In relation to climate theory, Benjamin Isaac has thus argued that 'a group of people who are believed to share common characteristics, physical or mental or moral which cannot be changed by human will, because they are thought to be determined by unalterable, stable, physical factors: hereditary, or external, such as climate or geography', perceive themselves as a race.²⁸ However, how stable were the physical factors determined by climate? How long was the process of complexional change generally thought to take if a person moved to a different environment? In the twelfth century, the Welsh, who according to Gerald of Wales originally descended from Aeneas' progeny Brutus, purportedly still could not forget their 'Trojan blood'.²⁹ Indeed, their boldness of speech, which they held in common with the Romans and Franks, but certainly not with the English or Germans, and the Britons' swarthy colour, natural warmth of character and hot temperament, all derived – according to Gerald – from nature and from their original descent from the hot and arid Trojan plain.³⁰ On the other hand, Otto of Freising's Lombards had transformed from barbarians into men of elegant manners.

With these questions in mind, I will turn first to the question how, according to medieval medical theory, complexions were passed on from parents to offspring, and whether or not they were fixed or fluent.

Innate and mutable complexions

Although not referring explicitly to complexions, Otto of Freising's remark about the Lombards contains two basic ingredients according to which a person's complexion was determined: through parental transmission – in this case the Roman mother's blood – and external influences, such as climate. Indeed, in medical theory, a person's individual complexion was viewed as both innate and at the same time adaptable to natural and non-natural particulars such as environment, air, season, exercise, the planets, food and drink.³¹ Thus, within medical theory, two types of complexion were distinguished within a person: the innate complexion, and the natural complexion, influenced by external factors. By the fourteenth century, in a commentary on the *Physiognomia* falsely attributed to Aristotle, Jean Buridan states this very clearly: 'Also know that a complexion is two-fold, for it can be judged that somebody has a certain innate complexion. The other complexion is acquired or fluent, and is not innate but acquired as a result of a regimen contrary to a person's complexion.'³²

28 Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism*, 34-35.

29 Gerald of Wales, *Descriptio Kambriae* II 15, ed. Dimock, vol. 6, 193-194.

30 *Idem*, I 15.

31 Ziegler, 'Physiognomy, science', 193; Groebner, 'Complexio/Complexion', 368-369; Van der Lugt, 'La peau noire', 459.

32 In Oxford, Bodleian, Canon Misc. MS.422, f. 111r-v. Quoted by Lynn Thorndike, 'De Complexionibus', 398 note 1: 'Sciendum est etiam quod complexio est duplex, quia quedam est iudicialis

Besides innate and natural complexions, there existed another additional notion of biological transmission of characteristics: the theory of pangenesis (which explained how acquired characteristics could be hereditary). In antiquity, Aristotle had remarked that children might be born with a scar on exactly the same bodily spot as their parents. The acquired characteristic – the scar – was said to be transferred to the parents' offspring through pangenesis. Pliny remarked that in some cases a birthmark on the arm could reappear even in the fourth generation.³³ In ancient times, this idea that acquired characteristics were hereditary had consequences for the status of autochthonous peoples such as Jews or Syrians, who, according to Cicero, 'were born to be slaves', passing down their servility to their children.³⁴ In the Middle Ages, however, the notion of acquired characteristics did not dictate theories of heredity – and thus remains beyond the scope of this study. Instead, emphasis was laid on generation: the complexion of the male semen and female blood at the moment of conception.³⁵

How did a person 'inherit' his innate complexion? According to medieval embryology the innate complexion was acquired through parental transmission, in which the complexion of the father's semen was usually dominant as it mixed with the maternal blood.³⁶ The male semen, carrying the *virtus informativa*, was predominantly considered responsible for the formation of the embryo and its members, which in general resembled the human species but bore accidental individual particularities such as sex, complexion, and skin colour. Originating in the heart and itself drawn from blood, this male semen thus emphasized blood 'as the defining constituent of the human being'. (As a result, male 'blood ties' were recognized over female blood in law.)³⁷ The complexion and quality of this formative spirit at the moment of generation determined the development of the embryo.³⁸ However, natural and 'non-natural' conditions or 'obstacles' might influence the (active) sperm at the moment of generation: the seasons, winds, the imagination(!), nutrition, stellar influences, and climate. The mother's (passive) blood could also hamper the reception of the

que inest alicui a principio natiuitatis. Alia est complexio acquisita sive fluens, que non inest a principio natiuitatis sed acquisita per regimen contrarium illi complexioni.'

33 Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 79-80. A famous example expounded by Hippocrates in *Airs, Waters and Places* is that the Longheads, who elongated their heads as a sign of nobility, passed on this physiological characteristic to their children. However, *Airs, Waters and Places* was not included on the faculty curriculum. Biller, 'Proto-racial thought', 162.

34 Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 81-82.

35 Ziegler, 'Physiognomy, science', 191-192. According to the theory of pangenesis, seeds come from all parts of the body and offer a material basis for the inheritance of acquired characteristics and disease. This theory only became popular in relation to the intergenerational transmission of characteristics within groups from the sixteenth century. In addition, there was the theory of radical moisture, which was said to determine someone's lifespan. Its natural heat is derived from the sperm during generation.

36 For the predominant embryological narrative in the later Middle Ages, see especially Joseph Ziegler, 'The Scientific Context of Dante's Embryology', in John C. Barnes (ed.), *Dante and the Human Body: Eight Essays* (Dublin 2007), 61-88, esp. at 74-82.

37 Ziegler, 'Scientific Context of Dante's Embryology', 76-77.

38 Ziegler, 'Physiognomy, science', 189.

paternal form;³⁹ in that case, the child was more likely to resemble the mother (or the grandparents).⁴⁰ The female's blood (*sanguis generationis*), although secondary, thus certainly was seen to influence the formation of the embryo, as seems to have been the case with Otto of Freising's Lombards. As a result, the parents' and offspring's complexion was not necessarily identical; for example, a sanguine father could generate a phlegmatic child, or vice versa.⁴¹

Even though the innate complexion was relatively stable, a person's natural complexion was subject to non-natural conditions throughout life. People with an innate sanguine complexion could thus slowly turn more choleric, the choleric more melancholic, although the transformation was more cumbersome if the complexions were less compatible (i.e. a phlegmatic cannot easily become choleric).⁴² This change could be effectuated by means of nourishment or, for example, a different climate from that of birth. After generation, a person's innate complexion therefore remained subject to all kinds of external influences such as climate and nutrition.

Parental transmission of complexional types

How likely was it that parents who both had the same dominant complexion would generate a child with a deviant temperament? A child was more inclined to inherit the same complexion as its parents if theirs was identical. The opening sentences of a widely circulating treatise, printed by a Leipzig publisher in 1500 as the 'Tractatus de complexionibus Magistri Johannis de Nova domo' address this matter rather extensively. The identity of this John of Newhouse is unknown. Werner Seyfert tentatively attributed the text to the thirteenth-century French Dominican philosopher and theologian John of Paris, although on shaky grounds (his name is frequently mentioned in the manuscripts). Other candidates include a 'Johannis Aurifaber, master of Erfurt' or Taddeo Alderotti, a thirteenth-century doctor from Florence.⁴³ However, in view of the geography of the repositories (three manuscripts at Erfurt, one at Breslau, one at Vienna, Klagenfurt, and Prague and several at Basel, one in the Vatican Library and one at the British Library) it is tempting to look for an author from northern central Europe.⁴⁴

Hinting at the influence of the heavens, the author first explains that as a result of humoral disposition, 'under this or that constellation, we have this or that complexion, manner, colour, figure and disposition'. Thus, warm signs are generated under a warm constellation. However, this is countered by an '*antiparistasis*' disposition, as there are Germans in the north, 'whose complexion

39 Ziegler, 'Scientific Context of Dante's Embryology', 86-87.

40 Van der Lugt, 'La peau noire', 458-460. Ziegler, 'Scientific Context of Dante's Embryology', 73 and 79 discusses the Galenic notion that the woman also emitted a generative female semen, in contrast to the Aristotelian notion that the embryo is formed from matter from the female's menses.

41 Ziegler, 'Scientific Context of Dante's Embryology', 87.

42 Ziegler, 'Physiognomy, science', 193-194.

43 'Tractatus de complexionibus Magistri Johannis de Nova domo' I, ed. by Werner Seyfert in: 'Ein Komplexionentext einer Leipziger Inkunabel', in: *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin* 20 (1928), 272-299 and 372-389. Ziegler, 'Physiognomy, science', 194, dates the manuscript as compiled in 1352, although it is unclear on what grounds.

44 Lynn Thorndike, 'De Complexionibus', 398 n. 2.

naturally is warm, and who have rather warm bellies, through the contrary pulse and through the union with natural heat, from the surrounding cold'.⁴⁵ The environment might also determine the complexion of natural fauna; thus fish in the water are phlegmatic (as are women), birds, flying through the air, are sanguine, and moles, under the ground, are melancholic.⁴⁶ In addition, the author formulates what is in essence a concept of parental transmission: 'It is manifest from particular causes that a phlegmatic man comes from a phlegmatic, and a choleric from a choleric, and this is especially so if both male and female are of the same complexion, they beget children of the same complexion.' At the end of the treatise the author further states that 'complexions follow from similar complexions, so that sanguine generates sanguine, and noble noble, and ignoble ignoble.'⁴⁷

As said, the transmission of complexion was however subject to environmental influences, both during pregnancy and shortly after birth.⁴⁸ Children placed under the care of a wet nurse, who received the wrong food or were moved to a different place, could undergo a change in complexion.⁴⁹ The treatise attributed to John of Newhouse states that a melancholy child who drinks his mother's milk will retain the same character. If, however, he were to be breastfed by a wet-nurse 'who has a beautiful, good complexion, then the nature of the son's complexion will transform and change. And this is true if it is continued over a long period of time. And because of this, sons do not always follow the physiognomy of their father or mother, because, naturally changed, they are fed with somebody else's blood.'⁵⁰ In general, however, offspring enjoyed the same complexion and disposition as their parents, especially when the parents took the proper dietary measures, 'for if the father's and the mother's complexion are in concurrence with their nourishment, then they beget children of the same complexion, for the deposited sperm and the female's blood, fed according to the same virtue, makes it sanguine'.⁵¹ Such remarks seem to have provided an increasingly firm foundation for 'biological' notions of a transmittable ethnic character. Strikingly, the *Treatise on*

45 'Tractatus de complexionibus Magistri Johannis de Nova domo' I, ed. Seyfert, 286: '...quia sub alia et alia constellatione alia et alia complexio et mos et color et figura et dispositio. Et ideo sub calida constellatione generantur calida signa, nisi per antiparistasim dispositio cogatur, ut in septentrione, sicut sunt Alemani, quorum complexio naturaliter est calida et ventres habent calidiores per contrariam pulsionem et unionem caloris naturalis a frigido circumstante.'

46 De Miramon, 'Noble dogs, noble blood', 205-206, for Albertus Magnus' discussion of the complexion of birds.

47 'Tractatus de complexionibus Magistri Johannis de Nova domo' I, ed. Seyfert, 286-287: 'Item est manifestum ex causis particularibus, ut ex viro phlegmatico generatur phlegmaticus et ex viro cholericus generatur cholericus et maxime si masculus et femella sunt eiusdem complexionis, generantur pueri eiusdem complexionis' and III, ed. Seyfert, 297: 'Sequitur de generatione complexionum a similibus, ut quod sanguineus generat sanguinem et nobilem nobilem et ignobilis ignobilem.'

48 As also remarked by Ziegler, 'Physiognomy, science', 194-195.

49 Tractatus de complexionibus Magistri Johannis de Nova domo' I, ed. Seyfert, 287: '...nisi sit variatio mammae et alimenti et loci, quia ista permutant complexionem in genito virtute naturali.'

50 Idem, III, ed. Seyfert, 298-299: 'Si vero detur nutrice pulchrae et bene complexionatae, convertatur et alteratur natura complexionis in puero. Et hoc est verum si fuerit hoc pro tempore longitudinis. Et propter hoc pueri non sequuntur semper phisonomiam patris vel matris, quia alio sanguine permutati naturaliter nutriuntur.'

51 Idem, III, ed. Seyfert 298: 'At si vir et mulier sunt eiusdem complexionis cum nutrimento, tunc generantur pueri eiusdem complexionis, quia tunc sperma descisum et menstruum mulieris nutriens secundum eandem virtutem sanguineus generatur.'

Complexions demonstrates the idea that members of ethnic groups, by *inheriting* the complexion of their forebears, share the same innate character, as long as the conditions are not markedly variable. It concludes: ‘The Saxons, and the Frisians, the Poles and the Thuringians all have the same character, because they are nursed in the same place and under the same constellation.’ A scribe commenting on this text even saw it fit to thus clarify rises in criminality in certain regions, stating that ‘thus there are more thieves in one country than another’.⁵²

The development of such ‘De complexionibus’ treatises, which appear in large numbers from the twelfth century, calls for further research. It is necessary to determine how widespread such notions of hereditary complexions were in this period, and research their influence on later ideas regarding national character. These treatises might have played a substantial role in the shift from beliefs in acculturation to early notions of purity and authenticity. In the fifteenth century, a prohibition of wet-nursing was indeed considered a prerequisite to maintain an innate, ‘pure’ national character. For example, in an account of the Scottish people from early times, the philosopher Hector Boece (circa 1465-1536), friend of Desiderius Erasmus and author of *Histories of the Scots*, argued that in ancient times the primal Scottish character had been preserved because mothers nursed their own children. Influenced by fashionable works such as Tacitus’ *Agricola*, Boece praises the primeval, pure, hardy, virtuous, independent, ‘barbaric’ character of the Scots – now a positive ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’ image, as it was in Tacitus’ work –, which had been tainted by their mingling with the English. In ancient times, Scottish mothers, feeding their children on their own milk, had proven their children’s legitimacy – an adulterous mother’s milk would be rejected by the progeny – thus ensuring lines of ‘pure’ descent. Moreover, their offspring did not degenerate from their ‘nature and kind’. As Mary Floyd-Wilson remarks, even in the seventeenth century, Anthony Weldon relates Scottish identity to the ‘savage mother’s milk’.⁵³

Not only did parental transmission generate the same ethnic complexion, under the right circumstances, it also secured nobility. John of Newhouse’s treatise speaks of parental transmission of both complexion and noble character. In fact, as Charles de Miramon has pointed out, the concept of ‘race’ evolved from a discourse on nobility in the late Middle Ages. Notably, the notion of ‘hereditary blood’, which gained currency especially from the fourteenth century, developed in hunting literature about noble hounds, birds and horses.⁵⁴ Indeed, the word ‘race’ was first employed, in the fifteenth century, in a hunting poem about dogs; its lexicography originates in the word *haras*, an old Norman word for stud farm.⁵⁵ Already from the thirteenth century onwards, discussions of hereditary noble lineage were gaining importance in a shift away from knighthood as

52 Zurich Car. C. 111 f. 207ra: ‘...et ideo in una terra sunt plures fures quam in alia.’ Quoted by Lynn Thorndike, ‘De Complexionibus’, 399 n. 5.

53 Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 2003), 56-8.

54 De Miramon, ‘Noble dogs, noble blood’, 208.

55 Idem, 201-202.

a definitive noble characteristic.⁵⁶ The orders, including the nobility, might increasingly be defined by referring to blood, ‘good breeding’, thus sharpening the class barriers for the rising urban middle class, although discussions of natural nobility stemming from individual virtue prevailed.⁵⁷ Earlier, from the twelfth century, the ennoblement of birds of prey, and later of dogs, had already been adopted and hierarchically paired to social classes: the count with the peregrine falcon, the priest with the sparrow hawk.⁵⁸ In one text, the inheritance of nobility might actually be compared to horse breeding. In the thirteenth century, in his *Questions on Animals*, Albertus Magnus thus poses the Aristotelian question whether philosophers will beget intelligent children. Affirming that this would be the case, Albertus continues by saying that ‘those of noble birth will beget noble and better children, as is the case with horses’, for ‘the sperm contains both the bodily and the mental virtue (...) thus children are akin to their parents in their bodily disposition, to that extent that they are by the same reasoning akin in mental disposition, such as in wisdom and knowledge’.⁵⁹ By the fifteenth century, the Moorish and Jewish ‘races’ were featured in a discourse on horse breeding and race in a marriage of the domains of ‘political disability and reproductive fitness’, as David Nirenberg writes in his discussion of fifteenth-century Spanish *anti-converso* ideology, excluding Jews converted (forcibly) to Christianity from offices based upon arguments of ‘blood’.⁶⁰ The concepts of noble lineage, breeding and ethnic categorization are in these cases certainly interwoven.

Migration and complexional change

To which extent might innate complexions, according to medieval theory, change within a geographical space? This is a relevant question as people did travel and migrate in medieval times, although more permanent migration was the prerogative mostly of intellectuals, missionaries, and international traders, hardly large population groups. Although perhaps therefore a somewhat hypothetical discussion – as the large bulk of people stayed at home, in their villages or towns – we can ask what purportedly happened to those who migrated for longer periods of time. Did they become diseased, were their bodies thought to undergo a fundamental transformation?

In the fourth century, in his commentary on the *Aeneid*, Servius had reiterated Ptolemy’s belief that upon moving from one region to another, man’s constitution might change to a certain degree, but never entirely. He had, after all, from the onset been endowed with a specific bodily

56 Keen, *Chivalry*, 143-145.

57 Idem, 146-147. In reality, however, the boundaries remained fluid. New families were constantly joining the nobility. There were also discussions about the difference between civil and natural nobility, based upon virtuous behaviour.

58 Idem, 205.

59 Albertus Magnus, *Quaestiones super de animalibus* XVIII Quaestio 4, in *Opera omnia*, ed. Ephrem Filthaut, vol. 12, 299: ‘Quod parentes nobiliores generant filios nobiliores et meliores, ut patet in equis (...) in spermate non solum est virtus corporis, sed animae (...) ergo cum filii assimilantur parentibus in dispositionibus corporalibus ut plurimum, pari ratione assimilabuntur in dispositione animae, ut sapientiae et scientiae etc.’

60 Nirenberg, ‘Race before modernity’, 250-252.

predisposition.⁶¹ In the early eleventh century, Avicenna (Ibn Sina) had stated that each individual had his own balanced complexion, depending on eight variables.⁶² Accordingly, an Indian who moved northwards would become imbalanced as the climate would not be conducive to his individual complexion; the same applied to a Slav who travelled south. In the thirteenth century, Albertus Magnus likewise states that ‘men who move to a different climate on account of the unnaturalness of the place [as regards them] grow weaker and are destroyed, and when they return to their native places, they recover health’. It was for the same reason that lions only survived in the more southerly regions.⁶³ Complexional change could, thus, come at a price.

Most Latin medical treatises on complexions, however, generally evinced the belief that complexional change from migration might bring some positive benefits, and that the sanguine type could indeed become choleric, or vice versa.⁶⁴ Conveniently for Albertus Magnus, born in Lauingen, Bavaria, but educated in Padua, German students travelling southwards experienced an expedient mental transformation. Originating in the cold north, ‘their humour is thick and bodily spirit does not respond to the motion and receptivity of mental activity. Therefore they are dull-witted and stupid.’ But ‘when they are moved to study they persevere longer and they are much better by far after mental exercise. The proof of this is that the people of Milan always study law, liberal studies, and the arts.’⁶⁵ There, a gentler climate generates a more astute, intellectual mind. Albertus Magnus also specifically mentions that the Danes and the Slavs, in the far north, ‘care little’ for study. In other words, for the Germans, although intellectually dullards, there was still hope. People living in even colder climes, however, lacking intellectual curiosity, refrained from moving southwards and thus remained stuck in their backwardness. Here, cultural inertia is the outcome of environmental influence.⁶⁶

Along the same line of reasoning, in the twelfth century the idea existed that a whole ethnic group’s character could – partially – change through migration. We have already seen that Otto of Freising remarked that the Lombards had attained finer manners after migrating from the north to Italy. In *On the Properties of Things*, Bartholomaeus explicitly explains the character of the people of Poitou in terms of ethnogenesis as the result of an intermingling of the character traits of the Picts and the Gauls. In ancient times, Bartholomaeus fantasizes, the Picts, Angles and Scots had sailed to the province of Gallia Narbonensis. After a fierce battle with the indigenous inhabitants, the migrating Picts, Angles and Scots settled down, attaching their name to the region and building the city of Poitou. According to Bartholomaeus, the inhabitants, ‘whose language and manners are

61 Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, 114-115.

62 Ziegler, ‘Physiognomy, science’, 195.

63 Albertus Magnus, *De natura loci* I 2, ed. Hossfeld, 4, transl. Tilmann, 33: ‘Ostendunt autem hoc homines loca sua mutantur secundum contraria climata, quia propter loci inconnaturalitatem infirmantur et destituuntur, et quando redeunt ad loca nativa, recipiunt sanitatem.’

64 Ziegler, ‘Physiognomy, science’, 195-196.

65 Albertus Magnus, *De natura loci* II 3, ed. Hossfeld, 27, transl. Tilmann, 104. See chapter 2 note 82 for quotation.

66 See also Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, 439.

intermixed with the regions of Gallia to the extent that although descending from the early Picts and thus being naturally strong and elegantly built, nonetheless have contracted from the Gauls, with whom they are intermixed, their fierce minds and sharper wits than neighbouring peoples'.⁶⁷ This is not surprising, Bartholomaeus says, because as a result of the climatic diversity of the heavens, people's skin colour, physical appearance and manners differ – thus the Romans are serious, the Greek light-hearted, the Africans cunning. And thus the people of Poitou are 'robustly built, with handsome faces, audacious spirits, and clever and astute minds'.⁶⁸ However, the change did not entail a full transformation. Although the character of the Picts had merged with that of the Gauls due to climatic influences, still they have retained certain original traits. The people of Poitou supposedly still carried within them the seeds of a Pictish nature – just as, according to Gerald of Wales, the Britons, descendants of Trojan Brutus, still retained a boldness of speech as a result of their origins in Asia Minor.⁶⁹

According to some scholars, skin colour could also change as a result of migration.⁷⁰ Albertus Magnus is quite clear about this. In a passage on the Ethiopians – who are 'exceedingly wrinkled from dryness, as a pepper seed, and very black on account of the heat (...) their bodies grow dark on account of the scorching of the body' – Albertus explains how change can take place after a length of time. For 'sometimes black people of this kind are born in other climes, as in the fourth or fifth', having migrated northwards. Nevertheless, although inheriting 'their blackness from their ancestors who are complexioned in the first and second clime, and a little at a time, they are altered to whiteness when they are transferred to other climes'.⁷¹ In first stance, therefore, their skin colour is innate, but over time the climate, the heat of the sun or coldness will bring about change. More remarkable theories about skin colour transformation involved the imagination and religious conversion. Maaïke van der Lugt has discussed the belief that maternal thoughts about the skin colour of the foetus could bring about skin change.⁷² In the fourteenth century, there were even vernacular tales about instantaneous skin-colour transformation as a result of conversion from Islam to Christianity. In the *King of Tars* (circa 1330), a Muslim king, upon marrying a Christian princess, is converted to Christianity. When he is baptized, his skin turns white, 'thurth Godes gras' (through

67 Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum* xv 122, 'De Pictavia': 'Cuius gens, lingua et moribus Galliarum provinciis est permixta, ideo quamvis a primis Pictis hoc habeant illius gentis nationes, ut sint natura fortes, corpore elegantes, hoc a Gallicis tamen quibus mixti sunt, contraxerunt ut animo sint feroces et ingenio prae aliis vicinis gentibus acriores.'

68 Idem: 'Et ideo gens Pictavia robusta corpore, facie venusta, audax animo est (...) callida ingenio et astuta.'

69 Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, 203.

70 Ziegler, 'Physiognomy, science', 196; Van der Lugt, 'La peau noire', 455-456.

71 Albertus Magnus, *De natura loci* II 3, ed. Hossfeld, transl. Tilmann, 101-102: 'nimia siccitate rugosa, sicut grana piperis, et nigra multum propter ipsorum caliditatem (...) nigrescunt corpora eorum propter sanguinis sui adustionem'. (...) Licet autem huiusmodi nigri aliquando nascantur etiam in aliis climatibus, sicut in quarto vel in quinto tamen nigredinem accipiunt a primis generantibus, quae complexionata sunt in climatibus primo et secundo, et paulatim alterantur ad albedinem, quando ad alia climata transferuntur.'

72 Van der Lugt, 'La peau noire', 461-469.

God's grace).⁷³ Similarly, in one of the legends in the encyclopaedic *Cursor mundi* ('Runner of the World', circa 1325), King David encounters four monstrous Saracens. When King David holds out three rods, blessed by Moses, which they kiss, their skin becomes as white as milk, and they take on a completely new appearance.⁷⁴

Summarizing, the theories of climate and complexion meant that individuals, but also ethnic groups, had innate yet malleable complexions and thus fixed and changeable physical and mental character traits. If individuals of the same complexion, living in the same region and following a balanced diet in compliance with their complexion, produced offspring, it was likely that their progeny inherited the same complexion. As a result of the influence of climate, this could also apply to ethnic groups. However, if individuals or group members migrated, then their 'ethnic character' could mutate. In this sense, ethnic character was not 'fixed'.

The idea that transmigration could eventually transform a people's complexion remained popular in later centuries. Jean Bodin, for instance, remarked that eventually people would change, as was the case with the Goths who had invaded Spain, and the Gauls who came from the environs of the Black Forest – although a millennium had since passed.⁷⁵ Lack of clarity remains however about the time-span required for complexional change. Although it was not wholly out of question that a member of an ethnic group could eventually change – as Albertus Magnus observed about the dull-witted Germans – how long did the metamorphose effectively take? The answer to this question was probably open to ethnocentric manipulation, depending on the desirability of emphasizing change (for example in the case of the negative image of northern barbarity) or stability (relevant to those originating from regions considered temperate).

In view of the above it might thus be argued that from the twelfth century, a paradigmatic shift occurred from the belief that ethnic characteristics were cultural (and passed down through genealogy) to the idea that they were hereditary. Thus, whereas in the twelfth century, William of Malmesbury speaks of the acculturation of the Scots, who are subject to a civilizing process, he also explains ethnic differences in environmental terms – as characteristics which are more or less fixed. However, even if individuals or whole ethnic groups were considered to be subject to upheaval, then it still remained open to dispute whether a person's nature would undergo essential changes. The

73 *The King of Tars*, ed. Judith Perryman (Heidelberg 1980), vs. 839; cf. Thomas Hahn, 'The Difference the Middle Ages Makes', 13-15; Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, 64-65 for further reading. Sharon Kinoshita, "Pagans are wrong and Christians are right": Alterity, Gender, and Nation in the *Chanson de Roland*, in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31:1 (2001), 79-111 discusses the instability of religion and disunity in Christian Europe and physiological description, here at 82.

74 *Cursor mundi* vs. 8119-8122, ed. Morris, 62; cf. Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 417.

75 For further discussion of the mutability of complexion as a result of transmigration, see Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 48-52. But as Mary Floyd-Wilson remarks, ethnicity for Bodin was in fact 'a conspiracy of causes'. It was not only shaped by environmental influences. "'Civilizing" forces, such as government, law, travel, diet, fashion, and education' also shaped character. Thus, for example, in order for complexion to change from transmigration, Bodin sets the precondition that 'laws and customs' should be maintained and kept.

question about ‘essential’ change is significant especially where religious identity is concerned. The role of religion in biological thinking about ‘innate’ characteristics and mutability is the subject of the final sections of this chapter.

Compulsory mutability and Christianity

Besides environmental influences, religion seems to form a fundamental constituent of biological thinking about ethnicity. Given the emotive charge of religion, the ‘embodiment’ or biological construction of religious differences – which were and are frequently confused or mixed up with ethnicity (the Saracen, for example, was used as an umbrella term for Muslims) – could lead especially to biological discrimination. This happened notably in medical discussions of the ‘Jewish nature’ and the Jews’ melancholy complexion, which was based upon Arabic astrology. In the ninth century, Abu Mashar al-Balkhi (Albumasar) had stated that faiths arose under the influence of the conjunctions of planets. Judaism, arising under Saturn, was assigned a melancholy complexion, characterized by fraud, wickedness, envy, perfidy and stubbornness, typical anti-Jewish stereotypes; this belief was quickly adopted in twelfth-century Latin astrology.⁷⁶

From the thirteenth century – diverging from ancient medical theory – an increasing intermingling and sometimes also tension arises between such medical and theological discussions. The idea of Jewish melancholy, for example, was discussed medically, but in the later thirteenth century, also theologically in *quodlibets*.⁷⁷ As Joseph Ziegler pointed out, in this period a tension was acknowledged between questions such as the material notion that behaviour was determined by complexion on the one hand and the spiritual-religious idea that a person had a rational soul, which according to Dante, was directly infused by God in a miraculous moment of creation (although Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas believed in the replacement of the various substances of the soul, vegetative, sensitive, which are *in potentia*).⁷⁸ The solution to this incongruence was to state that the complexion was not the cause but the sign of natural character; the principal causes of a person’s character and behaviour remained in the soul, congenital character coming ‘by divine appointment’. Such divine intervention could be brought about through stellar influence (implying that God was responsible for the melancholic character of Jews?). Moreover, as Ziegler argues, physiognomy was more about inclinations than fixed dispositions, as people retained a free will.⁷⁹

76 Biller, ‘“Scientific” View of Jews’, 140-141 and 154 for the Latin translation of Albumasar. Islam (the Saracen faith) was said to have arisen under Venus; Christianity under Mercury. In 1143, Hermann of Carinthia (or Dalmatia) had repeated this in his *De Essentiis*, who also wrote a treatise on the generation and nutritional care of Muhammad. According to Biller, more than a hundred Latin manuscripts are extant of another text containing the same statement, by the Arabic writer Alchabitius, which also became a curriculum text at Bologna at some time.

77 Idem, 150.

78 Ziegler, ‘Scientific context of Dante’s embryology’, 64-66; ‘Physiognomy, science’, 189-190.

79 Ziegler, ‘Physiognomy, science’, 190.

William of Conches (c. 1090- after 1154), in his commentary on Macrobius, thus said that although the planets influence predispositions, free will remains.⁸⁰

However, especially where the religious otherness of Jews and Saracens is concerned, the idea of free will and mutability often seems to fall short. This might be related to the notion that salvation required a specific ‘essence’.⁸¹ In early Christianity, for example in Paul’s Letter to the Romans, all of mankind was presented as equal, ‘spiritual’ descendants of Jacob and Esau.⁸² Many scholars have as a result stressed that *Christianitas* promoted a transnational myth of oneness and unity, seldom acknowledging internal differences. In Jeffrey Cohen’s opinion, for example, the Christian ecumenicity was ‘a universal body unmarked by such differentiations’.⁸³ In this sense, the universalism of Christendom crossed ethnic boundaries, which was part of its appeal and success. All were ‘God’s slaves’, regardless of status or descent.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, as Denise Buell argues, within early Christendom rhetorical strategies were employed using notions of ethnicity to explain what being a member of the Christian community entailed. Much of the rhetoric was clothed in terms of regeneration. Members of the Christian community described themselves as ‘reborn’ in Christ; becoming a Christian meant ‘activating’ their very being, developing an ‘acquirable fixed essence’ which all human beings possess and through which one achieves full humanness.⁸⁵

The rhetoric of rebirth is clearly present in the following twelfth-century passage from a sermon by Raoul Ardent of Poitou. On the Feast of the Holy Trinity, Raoul, a follower of the school of Gilbert of Poitiers and master in theology in Paris, ardently preached on Christian virtues, urging his audience with the words: ‘Let us try, each and every one, to rise above the vice of his own people. If you are a Jew, take pains to rise above your innate disbelief. If you are from France, take pains to overcome your innate arrogance. If you are from Rome, take pains to overcome your innate avarice. If you are from Poitou, take pains to overcome your innate gluttony and garrulity, and the likewise applies to the others.’⁸⁶ It is of specific interest here because the preacher speaks of contemporary ethnic stereotypes in conjunction with the notion of rebirth in Christ. The passage is a homily on John 3, wherein Nicodemus, a Pharisee, goes to see Jesus in Jerusalem. Jesus tells him that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, he needs to be reborn. But how can the elderly be reborn, asks Nicodemus – he cannot return to his mother’s womb. Jesus replies that he must be born again not only by the water but by the spirit. Through baptism and the Holy Spirit man can be reborn in Christ. Raoul expounds: ‘Nicodemus was a Pharisee, from that evil progeny which John the Baptist called a

80 Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 182.

81 Buell, ‘Christian universalism’, 125-126.

82 Boureau, ‘Hérédité, erreurs’, 70.

83 Cohen, ‘On Saracen Enjoyment’, 116.

84 Buell, ‘Christian universalism’, 111.

85 Idem, 114, 119.

86 Raoul Ardent, *Homilia* II, 2 ‘In die Trinitatis’, PL 155 1949C-D: ‘Conemur unusquisque vitium populi sui superare. Si Judaeus es, stude Judaeis innatam incredulitatem superare. Si Gallus es, stude Gallis innatam superbiam superare. Si Romanus es, stude Romanis innatam avaritiam superare. Si Pictavinus es, stude Pictavinis innatam ingluviem et garrulitatem superare, et similiter de caeteris.’ Cf. Meyvaert, ‘Voicing National Antipathy’, 748.

progeny of vipers. (...) But something good was born of this evil stock, as much as a rose from a thorn. (...) And therefore, brethren, that nobody is thwarted by his parent's evil, as neither the holiness of your forebears is of benefit to somebody who lives an evil life (...) nor is the son responsible for his father's crimes.' The message is clear: through baptism and by receiving the Holy Spirit, man can expunge his innate ethnic vices.

However, in medieval biological thinking, the question remains whether this acquirable fixed essence was equally acquirable for all. It is here especially where the embodiment of differences comes to the fore as grounds for discrimination and exclusion. This has to do with what Denise Buell has aptly termed 'compulsory mutability' – the notion within Christian universalism that change and conversion were compulsory. As Buell pointed out, early Christian universalizing claims can be termed potentially 'racist' when the religious other, to whom fixed characteristics are attributed, is exhorted to transform.⁸⁷ Discussions about ontological essences were sometimes employed hierarchically, favouring some groups over others and offering the rhetoric to marginalize 'those who had failed (in different ways) to activate the potential available to all humans'.⁸⁸ In the later Middle Ages, this notion of 'inability to transform' was particularly applied to Jews and Muslims. Especially from the fourteenth century, Jewish *conversi* in Spain, although converting to Christianity, were still viewed as different 'by nature', with different 'blood', arousing suspicion of moral corruption and heresy. Jews and Muslims were thus barred from Church and secular offices.⁸⁹

Complexional imbalance and sin

As such, in general terms, Christian universalism stretched across the whole of humanity. Boethius, in the fifth century, had stated that humans were all born from the same creator.⁹⁰ In discussions regarding social inequality or the origins of nobility, the common origin of mankind was thus sometimes stressed, as for example by Petrarch, who said that all blood had the same colour.⁹¹ However, in Christianity natural law could be relative. Indeed, according to patristic writers, although human beings were equal at creation, sin had divided humanity.⁹² As a result, there was a 'decay of species', a corruption of health.⁹³ Social inequality could thus be viewed as the result of vice; social control came from the necessity to curb the 'bestial nature' of those prone to vice.⁹⁴ The division of humanity was also genealogical, with the traditional medieval division of the earth into three continents inhabited by the descendants of Noah's three sons – Shem's progeny inhabiting

87 Buell, 'Christian universalism', 121.

88 Idem, 123.

89 Nirenberg, 'Race before modernity', 242. See also Ziegler, 'Physiognomy, science', 198.

90 Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, 62.

91 Idem, 69.

92 Idem, 74; Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, 261.

93 Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, 92-93.

94 Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, 75-77.

Asia, Ham's descendants black Africa and Japheth's white Christian Europe.⁹⁵ As Paul Freedman has demonstrated, this genealogical division also led to ethnic and social categorizations, the cursed descendants of Ham (and Cain) associated with both the dark-skinned Africans as well as the peasants tilling the land. The children of Japheth, on other hand, might be considered as Christian progeny (or as Honorius of Autun wrote, represented nobility).

The division of humanity did not just occur along genealogical lines. Some scholars even related the Fall and the 'decay' of species to complexional imbalance (sin causing ill-health, dark complexions and ugliness). Ninth-century Irish theologian John Scottus Erigena (c. 815-c. 870) was possibly the first medieval thinker to interweave environmental theory with the question of the diversity of the human race and early man.⁹⁶ In *The Division of Nature*, John Scottus explains that had Adam not sinned, he would not have been split into two different sexes.⁹⁷ John Scottus is adhering to the variant myth that Eve was created after Adam's original sin. No longer in his primordial condition as the image of God, man thereafter suffered further divisions, which were also subject to environmental influences:

Insofar as the diversity of man is discerned, and of one species from another, and types of stature are different, this does not have its cause in nature [i.e. the primordial form before the Fall] but arises from sin, and from the diversity of place and circumstances of lands, waters, airs, foods and the like, where people are born and nourished.⁹⁸

In twelfth-century thinking there is some evidence of a medicalization of moral issues in the discussion about physical imbalance and ill-health in relation to Adam's original sin.⁹⁹ As the humoral theory gained influence in Western Europe, the idea developed that the Fall of man had led to complexional imbalance. The earliest identified source propounding the likes is Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogue against the Jews*, composed by the Spanish convert from Judaism circa 1109, who argued that Adam's illicit desire had brought about an imbalanced complexion, and subsequent

95 For dark-skinned peoples and the belief that they were descendants of Ham, see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham. Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton and Oxford, 2005); Benjamin Braude, 'Cham et Noé. Race et esclavage entre judaïsme, christianisme et Islam', in *Annales. Sciences Sociales* 57/1 (2002), 93-125; for serfs' descent from Ham and Cain, see Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, 86-104.

96 Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, 262.

97 For earlier discussions about human procreation and sin, see George Boas, *Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1978), 70-71.

98 John Scottus, *De divisione naturae* II 7, *Patrologia Latina* 122, 533A-533B: 'Sectiones dicit circa hominem post peccatum non solum divisionem in masculum et feminam verum etiam in multiplices varietates qualitatum et quantitatum differentiarumque unius formae. Siquidem diversitas hominum a seipsis, qua uniuscujusque species ab aliis discernitur, et staturae modus variatur, non ex natura provenit, sed ex vitio, et diversitate locorum et temporum terrarum, aquarum, aërum, escarum, ceterarumque similium, in quibus nascuntur et nutriuntur. De diversitate morum cogitationumque superfluum est dicere, cum omnibus manifestum sit, ex divisione Naturae post peccatum initium sumpsisse.'

99 Ziegler, 'Medicine and immortality'.

mortality, even before he ate from the forbidden fruit. Theologians such as William of Conches and Alain of Lille (c. 1116-1202) repeated this in much the same vein.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) wrote in her medical treatise *Causes and Cures* that before the Fall Adam was in perfect health and sanguine; however, ‘when Adam knew what was good and by eating the apple did what was evil, black bile rose up within him in reaction to this change. Without the suggestion of the devil, [black bile] is not present in humans, either when they are awake or when they are asleep, because the sorrow and despair which Adam experienced in his transgression arise out of black bile.’ The imbalanced melancholic humour was thus the work of the devil, as were disease and dissolution in general. In addition, a melancholy disposition was accompanied by wavering beliefs, ‘for at Adam’s fall, the devil scorched the melancholy within him, and in this way [the devil] sometimes makes a person subject to doubt and lack of faith’. The devil’s suggestions frequently wormed their way into the melancholy man, making him gloomy and desperate. Following Adam’s transgression, ‘the radiance of innocence was darkened in him and his eyes, which before this had seen heavenly things, were snuffed out, and bile changed to bitterness in him and black bile into the blackness of impiety, and he was utterly changed into another form’.¹⁰¹ Sorrow and anger befell him.

Around 1200, Alexander Neckam wrote his major encyclopaedic work *On the Natures of Things*, probably whilst living as a canon at Cirencester. Alexander writes that before the Fall, man was in command of the animal world. However, after the Fall, in order to remind him of his deceit, man was hindered by even the smallest of beasts, with gnats and stinging flies annoying him, flying into his eyes and fleas keeping him from his sleep. Moreover, before the Fall, there had been no imbalances in complexion, for, as Alexander states, ‘it should also be known that if man had not sinned, there would be no noxious poison. Likewise every animal would be of temperate complexion in his own genus. Nevertheless, some animals would have a more temperate complexion than others. For before the sin of the primal deceit, Eve was of a temperate complexion, but Adam was the most temperate.’ Before the Fall, both Adam and Eve were thus, in accordance with their individual temperament, well-balanced, although Adam slightly more so than Eve. After the Fall, however, mankind suffered much greater diversity, for although created in the image of God, he was now flawed. Sin had paved the way for temperament to mutate. For, in Alexander’s words: ‘If then man

100 Irven M. Resnick, ‘Humoralism and Adam’s Body: Twelfth-Century Debates and Petrus Alfonsi’s *Dialogus Contra Iudaeos*’, in *Viator* 36 (2005), 181-195, here at 191-195. Cf. William of Conches, *Dragmaticon Philosophiae* VI 13 2-3, ed. Italo Ronca, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* 152 (Turnhout 1997), 227.

101 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causae et curae* II, ed. Laurence Moulinier (Berlin 2003), 183-185: ‘Nam cum Adam bonum sciuit et pomum comedendo malum fecit, in vicissitudine mutationis illius melancholia in eo surrexit, que sine suggestione dyaboli non est in homine tam uigilante quam dormiente, quia tristitia et desperatio ex melancholia ascendunt, quas Adam in transgressione sua habuit. (...) Quoniam dyabolus in casu Ade melancholiam in ipso conflauit, qua hominem aliquando dubium et incredulum parat. (...) Cum autem Adam transgressus est, splendor innocentie in eo obscuratus est, et oculi eius, qui prius celestia videbant, extincti sunt, et fel inmutatum est in amaritudinem et melancholia in nigredinem impietatis, atque totus in alium modum mutatus est.’ Trans. by Faith Wallis, in idem (ed.), *Medieval Medicine: A Reader* (Toronto 2010), 357-358. See also Boas, *Essays on Primitivism*, 75-77.

had not sinned, there would be no [difference of] degree, for a degree is a lapse from the norm. Therefore will it not appear to one versed in physical science that complexions may be changed, although many think this to be impossible?’¹⁰²

Although deemed impossible, complexional change, and ultimately the diversity of mankind, were thus caused by the original sin.¹⁰³ Although Alexander Neckam and Hildegard of Bingen do not relate the Fall of man directly to ethnic diversity, they believed that as a result of the original sin, man’s complexion became imbalanced. In view of the partially ‘innate’ nature of complexions – innate yet changeable – the medieval belief in a malleable, divided, unity of mankind is thus perhaps not so baffling. Stronger even than parental transmission and environmental influence, was the influence of sin, morality, and God.

Robert Bartlett has remarked that the medieval world was one in which blood and descent were seen as fundamental; for ‘the starting point or premise of such genealogical-ethnic thinking was that each race was a group of human beings of common biological descent’.¹⁰⁴ Bartlett added that ‘medieval thinkers who took climatic and geographical determinism seriously would clearly find it hard to believe in timeless descent groups of fixed nature’.¹⁰⁵ However, medieval concepts of biological ethnicity were, as we have seen, both fixed and fluent. They were tied up with concepts of sin, inequality, and God’s grace, with a strong religious undercurrent. Sometimes they were also intermixed with discussions of skin colour or complexion. As John Block Friedman writes, ‘color polarities were easily interchanged with moral polarities’. Thus, according to Paulinus of Nola (c. 354-431), the Ethiopian was burnt not by the sun but by sin. Within Christian allegory, the African body in particular could symbolize deformity, black skin being tied up with sin and the devil, as for example in Gregory the Great’s *Commentary on Job (Moralia in Job)*.¹⁰⁶ Blackness also provided

102 Alexander Neckam, *De naturis rerum* II 156, ed. Thomas Wright (2 volumes, London 1863), vol. 2, 250: ‘Sciendum est etiam quod, si non peccasset homo, nullum venenum nocivum esset. Esset item omne animal temperate complexionis in suo genere. Nihilominus tamen esset aliquod animal temperatioris complexionis alio. Ante peccatum enim primae praevaricationis temperatae complexionis erat Eva, sed Adam temperatissimae. Si igitur non peccasset homo, nihil esset gradus; est namque gradus elongatio a temperantia. Nonne igitur in physicis instructo videbitur quod complexionones mutatae sint, quamvis hoc multi censeant esse impossibile?’ Translation from Boas, *Essays on Primitivism*, 82-85.

103 These notions seem to faintly foreshadow much later classifications of mankind. Notably, in the eighteenth century, French philosopher Georges-Louis Buffon (1707-1788) addressed the issue how the descendants of Adam and Eve, expelled from paradise and living in inferior climates, suffered ‘degeneration’. Buffon believed both in monogenesis and acquired hereditary characteristics as a result of environmental influences, for human beings, dispersed across the earth, ‘underwent divers changes, from the influence of climate, from the difference of food, and of the mode of living, from epidemical distempers, as also from an intermixture, varied *ad infinitum*, of individuals more or less resembling each other.’ Buffon’s theory seems remarkably similar to the beliefs discussed above. See Banton, *Racial Theories*, 5 and Isaac, *Invention of Racism*, 8-11.

104 Bartlett, ‘Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity’, 45.

105 Idem, 47.

106 In ‘The Difference the Middle ages Makes: Color and Race before the Modern World’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31/1 (2001), 1-37, Thomas Hahn also points out that blackness does not always have a negative connotation. In the German version of *Mandeville’s Travels*, for instance,

‘the palimpsest for the racialized representation of Islam’, the Saracen soon imagined as a dark-haired, horned, big-nosed and broad-eared monstrosity with alluring sexual appeal in both geographical and literary sources, such as the *Roman de la Rose*, *Aliscans* or *Fierabras*.¹⁰⁷

Finally, I would like to add that biological theory also cut across social categories. Paul Freedman has demonstrated that the medieval peasant – like the black children of Ham a cursed descendant of Ham or Cain – is often represented as dark-skinned and deformed; in romance he can resemble a beast, or a Moor.¹⁰⁸ Joseph Ziegler has also pointed out that physiognomic treatises, although saying next to nothing about ethnic groups, sporadically make class-specific references about intellectually deficient, hard-skinned peasants.¹⁰⁹ These peasants were damned to a life of toil as a result of sin, from the Fall or the curse of Cain after he had murdered his brother Abel. A possible medical explanation for the peasant’s dark-skinned features can also be found in their proximity to the element earth when tilling the land. Not only ethnic but also social categories were thus subject to complexional variances. In a ‘Liber complexionum’, the anonymous author puts forwards the idea that a complexion also changes under the influence of a skill or occupation: iron and copper smiths are subject to heat and dryness (choleric), bath keepers to heat and humidity (sanguine), fishermen to cold and moisture (phlegmatic) and tillers of the land to cold and dryness (melancholy).¹¹⁰ In the later Middle Ages, the verse ‘When Adam dalved and Eve span, who was thanne a gentleman?’, popular during the Peasant Revolt of 1381, attempted to reverse this subjugation of the peasant, harkening back to the period before the Fall. However, stereotypes of otherness embodied in medical theory, religiously grounded in terms of sin, and culturally in terms of lack of civility, could remain tenacious and sometimes reappear in vehemence in modern Western Europe.

blackness signifies beauty (Hahn, *The Difference the Middle Ages Makes* 18). Within a monastic context, Bernard of Clairvaux elaborates on the famous words of the bride in the Song of Songs, ‘I am black but beautiful’ (1:5), blackness allowing ‘the soul to acknowledge and internalize an aspect of self-loathing as means of achieving wholeness’. (Hahn, 21) Abelard, too, makes erotic allusions to blackness as an ingredient of desire (Hahn, 23). See also Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, 64-65.

107 Cohen, ‘On Saracen Enjoyment’, 116-120, for an extensive discussion of dark skin colour and otherness regarding Saracens and Jews.

108 Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, 139-140.

109 Ziegler, ‘Physiognomy, science’, 188.

110 Quoted in Thorndike, ‘De Complexionibus’, 402.