Neumarkt 13

Ashkira Darman, ZH Kolonial, translated from German by Manuela Troxler and Martin Roth

On average residents of 15th century Zurich used to change their place of residence every five years. In this context of frequent relocation, the house name was often the only stable element, serving as a tool for orientation, identification and clarification of ownership. For example, a record of a sale from 1443 recounts the change of ownership of the "Hus zum M****kopff "which we today associate with the house situated at Neumarkt 13. Another source proves that in 1467 the "sidensticker" [silk ticker] Jörg Rott and his family lived in this house and paid five pounds in taxes. This goes to show that the first mention of the house name "Hus zum M****kopff" dates back to the 15th century.

Several houses in Zurich in the 14th and 15th century bear the term "M***" in their names. For example the house at Marktgasse 19 was known from the 16th century as "M***könig". Such house names are not unique to Zurich but can be found in numerous late medieval towns. But what did the contemporaries of that time understand by this, from today's point of view, racist term? In the early Middle Ages from the 6th to the 11th century, the term "M***" was a designation of origin and can be traced back to the Latin loanword "maurus" (referring to someone of Mauritanian origin). Increasingly, however, it merged with the Greek term "moros", which means foolish and godless. This conflation of words also reflects the view of "Christian Europe" on the "Muslim world." The controversial term consequently referred to inhabitants of Mauritania, to the whole of Africa, as well as to Muslims.

Until the Crusades in the 11th century, there was relative little direct contact in Europe with people who were referred to as M*** at the time. Nevertheless, numerous figures with explicitly black skin color appeared in theological texts and images. These figures embodied the negative, the sinful and evil for contemporaries. Until the late Middle Ages, horror images of grotesque black demons and devils with African features were spread.

As long-distance trade intensified from the 11th century onward, contact with people from the Arab and African regions also increased. This was accompanied by the emergence of more visual representations of so-called "M****." However, these representations were at times ambivalent. Black people were depicted as less than human or as torturers of Christ. However, there were also positive depictions of Black people, such as those of St. Mauritius, one of the three magi/kings in the biblical story of the birth of Christ, or individual African, non-Christian people who behaved in a "virtuous" manner. In Zurich as well as in the whole of southern Germany, however, there are no black depictions of St. Mauritius or of the city saints Felix and Regula, all three of whom belonged to the Theban Legion and were, for example, described as "moren" in an imperial chronicle in 1160.

In the art of the late Middle Ages, the variety of skin tones depicted decreased: Higher-ranking Christian people were increasingly depicted with white skin and Black people were increasingly depicted in a derogatory manner. In the process, clichés were taken up that continued to be prominent in modern racism. Religious and cultural attributes were progressively linked to external characteristics. In the Iberian Peninsula, for example, fundamental differences between people of a different race or ethnicity were asserted as early as the 15th century in order to deny certain people rights and privileges. This change in meaning illustrates that behind the figure of the "M***" there is an ambivalent history, which was strongly characterized by exclusion and demarcation. While the term did not yet have racist connotations in the time of the silk embroider Jörg Rott in the 15th century, it increasingly became a symbol of exoticism and foreignness.

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