

# 1. 'Those kinde of people'

## Africans in Britannia

There were Africans in Britain before the English came here. They were soldiers in the Roman imperial army that occupied the southern part of our island for three and a half centuries. Among the troops defending Hadrian's wall in the third century AD was a 'division of Moors' (*numerus Maurorum Aurelianorum*) named after Marcus Aurelius or a later emperor known officially by the same name. Originally raised in north Africa, this unit was stationed at Aballava, now Burgh by Sands, near Carlisle. It was listed in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, an official register of the Roman administrative system,<sup>1</sup> and there is an inscription referring to it on a third-century altar found in 1934 built facing down into a cottage wall at Beaumont, not far from Burgh.<sup>2</sup>

Though the earliest attested date for this unit's presence here is 253-8, an African soldier is reputed to have reached Britain by about the year 210. 'Of great fame among clowns and good for a laugh any time' (*clarae inter scurras famae et celebratorum semper iocorum*), this 'Ethiopian' has gone down in history as a man daring enough to mock the emperor who, in all probability, had brought him to Britain. It happened near Carlisle. Septimius Severus, the Libya-born emperor who spent his last three years in what was then a remote province, had been inspecting Hadrian's wall. He had just defeated the wild Caledonians who lived on the other side and, being very superstitious, was hoping for a good omen. He was far from pleased to encounter a black soldier flourishing a garland of cypress boughs. Sacred to the underworld god Pluto, the cypress could mean only one thing to a Roman: death. Severus was troubled, not only by the ominous nature of the garland, but also by the soldier's 'ominous' colour. 'Get out of my sight!' he shouted. The soldier replied sardonically: 'You have been all things, you have conquered all things, now, O conqueror, be a god!' Matters were hardly improved when, wishing to make a propitiatory sacrifice,

Severus was provided with victims which also happened to be black. Abandoning the sacrifice in disgust at this further bad omen, he found that his attendants had carelessly brought these animals to the very door of the palace.<sup>3</sup> It was a black day, as we say, for the emperor – we share some puns with the Romans, and some superstitions – and he died not long afterwards, at York.

Besides African soldiers and slaves, there may well have been officers (*praefecti*) from the flourishing towns of north Africa serving in Roman Britain in the second and third centuries.<sup>4</sup> And, though no remains have yet been positively identified, there can be little doubt that Africans were buried here. Among 350 human skeletons found in an excavation at York in 1951–9 – the greatest number yet exhumed in any Romano-British cemetery – were several of men whose limb proportions suggest that they were black Africans.<sup>5</sup>

### Africans in Scotland

There are traces of an African presence in the British Isles some 400 or 500 years after the Romans left. An ancient Irish chronicle records that 'blue men' (*fir gorma*) were seized by Vikings in Morocco in the ninth century and carried off to Ireland, where they stayed for a long time.<sup>1</sup> And the remains of a young African girl were recently found in a burial, dated *c.* 1000, at North Elmham in Norfolk, about 25 miles north-west of Norwich.<sup>2</sup> Then the records are silent until the early sixteenth century, when a small group of Africans was attached to the court of King James IV of Scotland, experiencing in the royal service what has been called a 'benevolent form' of the black slavery that had become common and fashionable in southern Europe during the preceding 200 years.<sup>3</sup> These Africans were probably taken from Portuguese slavers by the Barton brothers, Scottish privateers whose father's ship, loaded with rich merchandise, had been seized by a Portuguese squadron and who had been authorized by James IV to seize Portuguese ships until the equivalent of 12,000 ducats was recovered.<sup>4</sup>

One of the Africans in Edinburgh was a drummer ('taubronar') and choreographer. For the Shrove Tuesday festivities in 1505 he devised a dance with 12 performers in chequered black-and-white costumes, specially made at a cost of £13 2s. 10d. The king loved music, himself played both lute and clavichord, and was generous to other musicians; and he seems to have liked the drummer. He bought him a horse costing £4 4s. and took him at least once, with four Italian minstrels and three falconers, on the annual royal pilgrim-