

Hierarchy and Holiness in the Earliest Colonial Black Hagiographies: Alonso de Sandoval and His Sources

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Alonso de Sandoval, a Jesuit priest born in Seville and raised in Lima, wrote the first known black saints' lives in the Americas as part of a treatise on African evangelization. These hagiographies portray black sanctity in Spanish America as legitimate—because of ties to a lofty ancient and early Christian past—and yet compatible with an emerging racialized labor regime that associated dark-skinned peoples of African descent with the status of servitude. Sandoval's efforts to advance an image of spiritually venerable but enslaveable Africans reveal themselves if we contrast his hagiographies to three sources implicated in his text: a history of Ethiopia by the Dominican Luis de Urreta; a hagiographic anthology by the Franciscan Antonio Daza; and an archival record from early seventeenth-century Quito that reveals the identity of one of the anonymous rumored black saints whom Sandoval mentions in his treatise, Antón Angola. Comparing Sandoval's hagiographies to these sources exposes both the ideological work of the first black hagiographies in the Americas and the existence of competing interpretations of black sanctity that do not appear in his treatise.