

Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

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the Americas (1600-1700)

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Baltasar Barreira

DATE OF BIRTH 1531
PLACE OF BIRTH Lisbon
DATE OF DEATH 24 June 1612
PLACE OF DEATH Santiago, Cape Verde

BIOGRAPHY

Baltasar Barreira was born in Lisbon in 1531. At the age of 25, he joined the Society of Jesus and served for a number years in Portugal before being sent abroad as a missionary. Biographers describing his Portuguese ministry especially laud his compassion and care for the sick during the 1569 plague epidemic in Lisbon ('Barreira, Balthazar', in Rose (ed.), *A new general biographical dictionary*, p. 223).

In 1577, Barreira was sent to the kingdoms of Luanda, Angola and Congo, where he worked for 14 years (d'Outreman, 'Baltasar Barreira', p. 74). It seems he was recalled to Portugal in 1592 (d'Outreman, 'Le Père Baltazár Barreira', pp. 307-8; 'Barreira, Balthazar', in Rose (ed.), *A new general biographical dictionary*). Information for the period between 1592 and 1604 is scarce, though there are indications that he worked at the Jesuit college in Evora ('Barreira, Balthazar', in Rose (ed.), *A new general biographical dictionary*).

In 1604, Barreira, already a septuagenarian, was elected to head a four-person mission to the west coast of Africa, called the Guinea of Cape Verde. Contemporary sources state that, despite his advanced age, he had repeatedly requested to be allowed to return to Angola (d'Outreman, 'Baltasar Barreira', pp. 74-5), and when that proved not to be possible he rejoiced in the new challenge of working in Guinea: 'that old man was so happy that tears of joy flowed down his cheeks' (d'Outreman, 'Le Père Baltazár Barreira', p. 309).

In July 1604, Barreira and three other Jesuits landed on the island of Santiago, Cape Verde. The aim of their mission was to evangelise the Guinea coast as well as to open a school in Santiago that could serve as a minor seminary (Teixeira da Mota and Hair, *Jesuit documents*, no. 3 [ARSI, lus. 83, fols 362-4]). Six months after arriving at Santiago, Barreira and Brother Pero Fernandes set off for the mainland of Africa, leaving Fr Manoel de Barros in charge of the mission house in Santiago. The

fourth member of the party, Fr Manuel Fernandes, had died within five weeks of arrival (Teixeira da Mota and Hair, *Jesuit documents*, no. 4 [Guerreiro, *Relaçam*, vol. 4, ch. 8]).

Barreira and Fernandes spent six months in the Cacheu region (in present-day Guinea Bissau), after which Barreira continued to the Sierra Leone estuary, leaving Fernandes behind to work in Cacheu (Teixeira da Mota and Hair, *Jesuit documents*, no. 7 [ARSI, lus. 83, fols 357-8]).

Barreira is best known for his letters and reports about the Sierra Leone region, where he worked until 1608. His reports and letters indicate that he was optimistic about the possibilities of spreading Christianity in the region; he repeatedly writes of how he was hospitably received by local African chiefs and how several requested baptism for themselves as well as for their family members (Teixeira da Mota and Hair, *Jesuit documents*, no. 29 [Guerreiro, *Relaçam*, chs 2-5]).

In 1608, Barreira returned to Santiago, travelling along the coast via Bissau and the Petite Côte (Joal and Portudal) of present-day Senegal. From 1608 onwards, he worked in Santiago, where, in the words of Paul Hair, he 'unprofitably spent the remaining years before his death in 1612, trying to organise the establishment of a seminary college and quarrelling with the governor' (Teixeira da Mota and Hair, *Jesuit documents*, p. 11). Barreira died in Santiago on 24 June 1612, well over 80 years old.

Barreira's work in the Sierra Leone estuary was continued by Fr Manuel Álvares, and after Álvares's death in 1617 the Jesuit mission to Sierra Leone was discontinued. According to a letter from 1617 written by Fr Sebastião Gomes to the Jesuit provincial, this was partly because of the high mortality rate among Jesuit missionaries, and partly because the captaincy of Sierra Leone was in the hands of Pedro Álvares Pereira, who distrusted the Jesuits (Teixeira da Mota and Hair, *Jesuit documents*, no. 48 [ARSI, lus. 74, fols 141-3]). For a number of years, the Jesuits continued to work in the Cacheu region and in Santiago. In 1642, the Jesuit mission to the Cape Verde Islands and the Guinea of Cape Verde closed down permanently.

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WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Letters and reports 1604-12

DATE 1604-12

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Portuguese

DESCRIPTION

Baltasar Barreira was a prolific writer of a large number of letters as well as extensive annual reports on the Jesuit mission in the Guinea of Cape Verde. About 20 letters, five annual reports and some other materials have survived. Substantial parts of the reports as well as compilations of Barreira's letters were published almost immediately after they were despatched. Consequently, some of his writings have been preserved

and transmitted in print, while the original manuscripts are no longer extant. Much of the Barreira material can be found in the fourth volume of Fernão Guerreiro's *Relaçam annal das cousas que fezeram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus* (1609), as well in P. du Jarric's *Troisiesme partie de l'histoire des choses plus memorables* (1614).

Barreira's reports and letters give an extensive and lively description of Africans and Europeans on the Upper Guinea coast at the beginning of the 17th century, making clear that the region was an important African-European political and commercial contact zone. The documents clearly reflect Barreira's pursuit of Portuguese and Jesuit interests on the Guinea coast, as is evidenced by his constant advocacy to consolidate Portuguese power in West Africa. But he also offers ethnographic accounts about the region, describing the scenery, the peoples, their customs and their culture. Themes addressed in the reports and letters include the political organisation of the region, the inter-ethnic clashes, transatlantic slavery, ritual life, traditional religiosity and the spread of Islam. Interestingly, when talking about the latter, Barreira does not use the words 'Islam' or 'Muslims' as such; rather, he refers to Islam as 'the [cursed] sect of Mohammed' or 'the religion of the Moors' and to Muslims as 'those who practise it' or 'those who belong to it'.

Barreira's ethnographic accounts are written from the vantage point of Christian mission, interwoven with narratives of evangelisation, conversion and conquest that inform the reader of the progress of Christianity (in its Jesuit interpretation) on the Upper Guinea coast.

SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of the Barreira material is twofold. First, he gives ample attention to Islam in the region, describing its spread among the Wolof, the Mandinka, the Serer and the Fulani, as well as the initial contacts of groups in the Sierra Leone estuary with Islam. Barreira is one of the oldest sources on West Africa that distinguishes between the various forms by which Muslim scholars (called *bixirin*) propagated Islam in the region: by education, by the manufacture of amulets and also by dispersion of their scholarly community, with senior scholars sending out their students to start new settlements in unfamiliar territories. Barreira also describes the influence that Muslim scholars had among African chiefs, and narrates that *bixirin* and their pupils often lived in their own settlements, close to but separate from traditional villages.

Second, Barreira is the oldest source in West Africa that explicitly frames the relation between Christians and Muslims as one of competition

for the soul of Africa. He reiterates again and again the need to send more missionaries to Guinea in order to prevent Islam from gaining the upper hand. He himself experienced the reality of this competition: in 1607, a scheduled baptism of the Sousou king was thwarted by the appearance of a praise-singer (called *Judeu, griot*) who for hours on end sang songs vehemently denouncing Christianity and praising Islam, resulting in the king's change of heart (Teixeira da Mota and Hair, *Jesuit documents*, no. 29).

As early as 1606, Barreira observed that Christianity only seemed to make headway among traditional believers, but no progress whatsoever was made in areas where Islam was already present. He states: '[I]t does not appear that there is any cure for those who have already received the sect of Mohammed but one may have more hope for others who have only sniffed at this sect or still have idols they worship' (Teixeira da Mota and Hair, *Jesuit documents*, no. 13).

PUBLICATIONS

Barreira's surviving letters are scattered over a series of archives.

A substantial number can be found in Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI), Rome, while others are held in the Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (ATT), Lisbon. Other letters, as well as most of the annual reports, no longer appear to be extant in manuscript form, though they have been transmitted in print via Du Jarric's *Troisiesme partie de l'histoire des choses plus memorables* (1609), as well as Guerreiro's *Relaçam annal das cousas que fezeram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus* (1614).

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