

## John Blanke's Hat in the Westminster Tournament Roll

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**DOI**

[10.1093/notesj/gjab156](https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjab156)

**Publication date**

2021

**Document Version**

Accepted author manuscript

**Published in**

Notes & Queries

**Citation (APA)**

van Pelt, N. T. (2021). John Blanke's Hat in the Westminster Tournament Roll. *Notes & Queries*, 68(4), 387-389. <https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjab156>

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## JOHN BLANKE'S HAT IN THE WESTMINSTER TOURNAMENT ROLL

*This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in Notes & Queries following peer review. The version of record of 'Nadia T van Pelt, John Blanke's Hat in the Westminster Tournament Roll, Notes and Queries, 2021;', gjab156,*

*<https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjab156> is available online at:*

*<https://academic.oup.com/nq/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/notesj/gjab156/6460225>*

*and <https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjab156>.*

John Blanke, the trumpet player of African descent who performed at the Tudor court as 'king's trumpet' for both Henry VII and Henry VIII is referred to in the Chamber Book accounts as 'the blacke Trumpet'.<sup>1</sup> Blanke has also been identified as the black instrumentalist on horseback on the Westminster Tournament Roll.<sup>2</sup> This has prompted scholarship on his appearance, as this might offer additional clues as to his background or even his life prior to his appearance in the Tudor account books. I argue in this note that evidence from the Burgundian court records of Archduke Philip 'The Handsome' ('le Beau') (1478–1506) may help scholarship reconsider interpretations that make assumptions about John Blanke's origins or religious beliefs, and complicates these interpretations by suggesting that he may have worn a head-dress according to his current or previous employment rather than as an indicator of religious or ethnic identity.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in his first recorded payment in 1507: 'Item to John Blanke the blacke Trumpet for his moneth wag[es] of Nouembre last passed at viij d the Day xx s'. M.M. Condon, S.P. Harper, L. Liddy, S. Cunningham, and J. Ross, eds., *Chamber Books of Henry VII and Henry VIII*, TNA, E36/214 fol. 109r, [https://www.dhi.ac.uk/chamber-books/folio/E36\\_214\\_fo\\_109r.xml](https://www.dhi.ac.uk/chamber-books/folio/E36_214_fo_109r.xml) [accessed 16 April 2021].

<sup>2</sup> Sydney Anglo, 'The Court Festivals of Henry VII: A Study Based Upon the Account Books of John Heron, Treasurer of the Chamber', *Bulletin of John Rylands Library* xliii (1960/1961), p. 42.

The Westminster Tournament Roll offers a visual representation of the ceremonies, jousts, and spectacles organised in 1511 to celebrate the birth of prince Henry, Katherine of Aragon's and Henry VIII's son. Trumpet players contributed to court ceremonial by announcing the presence of their patrons. Their far-reaching sounds and the visual display of their banners showing the royal arms raised awareness among participants and spectators of an event that the main 'player' — in this case Henry VIII who had successfully continued his line, and secured his first heir — was about to arrive or perform an act which needed their attention. As such, the trumpet players' role during the tournament and celebrations was significant, and their appearance on the Tournament Roll forms an integrated part of the story-telling of the event, and how this was to be remembered by posterity.

Scholarship on John Blanke has necessarily turned to the Tournament Roll for its visual display of this particular trumpet player. Although the drawings are not naturalistic — the five white-skinned trumpet players almost look identical — it is a unique document suggesting how the artist, or his patron, saw, or wished to record, John Blanke's appearance. In scholars' description of what they saw in the Tournament Roll, something stands out: the musician's head-dress.

Thus we find that the educational pages of the National Archives note that 'All the trumpeters are wearing yellow and grey, with blue purses at their waists. John Blanke is the only one wearing a brown *turban* latticed with yellow. He is mounted on a grey horse with a black harness'<sup>3</sup> [emphasis mine]. Imtiaz Habib similarly writes that the Tournament Roll 'shows a black trumpeter... seated on a grey courser dressed richly in yellow and grey, and

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<sup>3</sup> 'The Black Trumpeter at Henry VIII's Tournament', [Black presence \(nationalarchives.gov.uk\)](https://nationalarchives.gov.uk) [accessed 12 July 2021].

— uniquely among the other trumpeters — wearing an elaborate turban’.<sup>4</sup> Also Tess Knighton suggests that Blanke was ‘wearing a turban’.<sup>5</sup>

Explanations for Blanke’s head-covering have also been offered. Miranda Kaufmann, suggesting that the head-cover was a ‘green and gold turban’,<sup>6</sup> has connected a potential religious background to this gear. John Blanke married in 1512, and evoking this occasion, Kaufmann suggests:

To marry in a Catholic ceremony, both parties had to have been baptised. Hence, while he may have been born into a Muslim family in North Africa or Spain, and despite the turban he wore at the Westminster Tournament the year before, by 1512 John Blanke was a Christian, at least on paper.<sup>7</sup>

The key word here is ‘despite’, suggestive of the strength of the value Kaufmann attributed to the wearing of the head-covering displayed in the Tournament Roll, and marrying through a Christian ceremony.

Kate Lowe has furthermore concluded that the fact that the other trumpet players displayed on the Westminster Tournament Roll wore their hair uncovered, but that they otherwise wore the same livery as John Blanke, demonstrates that ‘on account of his skill with his trumpet he must have been allowed this minor deviance in dress, which obviously was vital to his cultural identity’.<sup>8</sup> The suggestion is made here that the ‘hat’ or ‘minor deviance in dress’ — note that Lowe does not use the word ‘turban’ — was either a socio-

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<sup>4</sup> Imtiaz Habib, Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible (London, 2008), 39–40.

<sup>5</sup> Tess Knighton, ‘Instruments, Instrumental Music and Instrumentalists’, Companion to Music in the Age of the Catholic Monarchs, ed. Tess Knighton (Leiden, 2016), 116.

<sup>6</sup> Miranda Kaufmann, Black Tudors (London, 2017), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Kaufmann, Black Tudors, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Kate Lowe, ‘The Stereotyping of black Africans in Renaissance Europe’, Black Africans in Renaissance Europe, ed. T.F. Earle and K.J.P. Lowe (Cambridge, 2005), 39.

cultural, ethnic, or religious marker; this is not specified, but implied through the word ‘cultural identity’. Lowe continues to note how unexpected this particular visual representation is: ‘This is a very rare case of a black African in Renaissance Europe in a court setting not wearing standardised court attire’.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the reason for this being a ‘rare case’ of a black African performing music in a courtly setting ‘not wearing standardised court attire’, may be that this may *not* have been a case of a musician wearing headgear that was ‘vital to his cultural identity’, nor a case of a musician wearing non-standardised attire for the context in which he performed. Indeed, it is possible that John Blanke was wearing a typical head-dress as it was worn by trumpet players at the court of Ferdinand of Aragon.

In the ‘Reise des Erzherzogs: Philipp nach Spanien 1501’ in Die Handschriften der K.K. Hofbibliothek in Wien we find a reference to eight trumpet players from Spain who had been sent by the Spanish king Ferdinand to entertain Archduke Philip and his wife, Juana of Castile — who was Ferdinand’s daughter — on their journey to Spain.<sup>10</sup> The musicians had travelled to the English court, hoping to find Philip and Juana there, but instead had an encounter with Juana’s sister, Katherine of Aragon.<sup>11</sup> The trumpet players finally caught up with the Archducal couple in France in Guîtres. The writer recording Philip and Juana’s overland journey describes the trumpet players in the following way: ‘*huyt trompettes du Roy despaigne tous habilliez dung manteaux de rouge drap a la maniere despaigne, et vne barette sur leur teste de velours vert*’ [eight trumpet players of the king of Spain all dressed in coats made of red cloth in the manner of Spain, and on their heads a beret of green velour].<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lowe, ‘The Stereotyping of black Africans’, 39.

<sup>10</sup> This source is also referred to in: María Elena Cuenca Rodríguez, ‘Patrocinio Musical en el Viaje de Felipe y Juana a la Península Ibérica a Través la Crónica de Viena’, Revista de Musicología xlii: 1 (2019), 29.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Chmel, ed., Die Handschriften der K. K. Hofbibliothek in Wien (Vienna, 1841), II, 583.

<sup>12</sup> Chmel, ed., Die Handschriften der K. K. Hofbibliothek in Wien, II, 583.

The entry shows two potentially significant things: first of all, that the account keeper of Philip and Juana's journey interpreted the type of red coat and a green velour beret as it was worn by the eight musicians as typical 'livery' for a Spanish trumpet player. Secondly, that when the eight trumpet players visited the English court looking for Philip and Juana, they were seen sporting this outfit. As the instrumentalists were all dressed in similar apparel, the status of this type of dress as a uniform or livery would have been clear to all who saw them.

We do not know if John Blanke arrived at the Tudor court having previously worked at another European court. There is no evidence placing him in a particular context prior to his appearing in the Tudor chamber books. However, the reference to trumpeters in 'beret[s] of green velour' at least hints at a possible alternative interpretation of Blanke's green hat in the Westminster tournament role. Could he too have had a connection to King Ferdinand's court? It should be noted, however, that the appearance of the green beret in the Westminster Tournament Roll does not have to be a true-to-life recording of John Blanke's actual appearance. It may have been an invention by the artist creating the manuscript, so as to symbolically refer to a Spanish connection. It is however, of course, also a distinct possibility that Blanke *did* wear this beret. In that case, one may wonder as to whether it was his choice to do so, either because of a habit or a sense of loyalty to a past employer, or to signal that he was still working under the patronage of the Spanish king, even though he was now entertaining at the Tudor court. It is also possible that members of the court having previously seen the Spanish fashion for trumpet players, imposed this head-dress on the trumpet player; If Blanke was not Spanish, the court may still have wanted to pass him off as such. Perhaps this was for similar reasons as Henry VII's seeking to follow Burgundian trends during the festivities surrounding Arthur Tudor and Katherine of Aragon's wedding: to show himself to

be up to date with the ‘latest’, and to be a match, culturally, for any monarch in Europe.<sup>13</sup> I hope that this new suggestion for Blanke’s ‘hat’ may help problematize a well-meaning assumption that could, without meaning to, create narratives about John Blanke that may, but do not necessarily, apply.

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<sup>13</sup> Gordon Kipling, ed., *The Receyt of the Ladie Kateryne*, Early English Text Society, Original Series 296 (Oxford, 1990), xx, xxiv–xxv.