The word ’race’: Spain and France 15th Century

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In their recent *Cultural History of Heredity* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), Staffan Müller-Wille and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger have laid down a generic historical and theoretical framework to analyse the emergence of concepts of heredity and evolution in Natural Sciences. They insist on what they call mobilisation, the knowledge regime oriented to the idea that populations of plants, animals or men could be translocated or transplanted in different settings, evolve or persist over generations untouched by their environment.

One of the early signs of this new knowledge regime is the appearance of the word race in Europe during the late Middle Ages. Unknown in Latin or Greek, the word appears in French and Spanish during the last decades of the 15th century. In my paper, I will study the earlier occurrences of the word and show how they echo a shifting knowledge regime about nobility. Mainstream ideologies of nobility link it to virtue and good nurturing. Nobility is foremost an individual value. Race redefines nobility as a population with an hidden hereditary virtue.