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Prester John: A Reexamination and Compendium of the Mythical Figure Who Helped Spark European Expansion

By

Michael E. Brooks

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for

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An Abstract of

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This work reinterprets the evolution and pervasiveness of the Prester John myth, following the legend from its geographical and historical roots in central and eastern Asia to its final setting in Abyssinia. However, unlike most works on the subject, which typically begin with the twelfth-century writings of Otto of Freising, the author of this dissertation argues that a more complete understanding of the legendary priest-king requires an analysis of the literary traditions that created the ideal environment for the naissance of the Prester John saga. In addition, the influence that the Prester John legend exerted on the mindset of late medieval and early modern Europeans has been understated by many historians; this is in part due to the effects of periodization, whereby modern writers expect historical figures such as the Infante Dom Henrique, Christopher Columbus, and Duarte Lopes to behave in a modern - rather than late medieval - fashion.
In this project, textual analysis of modern college history textbooks demonstrates that Prester John has been written out of world history and European history curricula, perhaps due to this atemporal desire to view late medieval Europeans as more “modern” than they really were. This work also reevaluates the role that the Prester John myth played with regard to specific European voyages of exploration, expansion, and exploitation. Unlike previous text-based studies of the legend of Prester John, this dissertation also incorporates analysis of visual depictions of the mythical priest-king and his empire. Finally, this study demonstrates that the legend of Prester John continued to be taken seriously by many Europeans until the eighteenth century, which contradicts the orthodox historiography that emphasizes the gradual fading of the legend by the end of the sixteenth century.
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Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my late grandmother, June Carol Hoag Maples. As much as anyone you encouraged me in my early years to read challenging books, to write down my thoughts, and to maintain true to my beliefs. Even though you lived to be 93, I still think you had another 10 more years of wisdom to share with us, and we think about you and miss you every day.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Many late medieval and early modern travel and exploration accounts contain references to a mythical priest-king named Prester John, a man who – according to this European tradition – reigned over a vast kingdom somewhere in the East. This legendary figure also appeared in a wide variety of literary works from the thirteenth through the nineteenth centuries. For European explorers, and the monarchs who often financed their expeditions, Prester John represented a very real potentate who could serve as a desirable ally in the struggle for dominance against the forces of Islam. Yet – despite the presence of countless references to the priest-king in late medieval and early modern documents – Prester John remains little studied except by a handful of field-specific historians, and until this dissertation there has yet to be produced a comprehensive account that traces the evolution of the Prester John legend across the geographical and temporal boundaries that comprised the mythical figure’s “life.”

The legend itself took on a wide variety of forms, and there is no single definitive account that can be considered to be an archetype. At the risk of oversimplification, however, a brief summary of the general features of the legend of Prester John is in order to assist readers unfamiliar with the fabled priest-king. Prester John was believed to be a powerful ruler somewhere in the vaguely-defined Indies who possessed a kingdom that far surpassed those of his European counterparts, and whose wealth defied human
imagination. Most accounts associated a number of magical or miraculous happenings in his kingdom, and often the narratives contained descriptions of monstrous creatures not found in Europe. Oftentimes the kingdom of Prester John would be described as a burgeoning source of commodities in short supply in medieval Europe, such as cinnamon, pepper, gemstones, or gold. Frequently Prester John was associated with Christian eschatology, and the priest-king also became connected to Christian folklore, such as the journey of St. Thomas to India or Prester John’s supposed heritage as a descendent of the Magi who brought gifts to the infant Christ. In addition, narratives featuring Prester John typically depicted the priest-king as an especially pious and reverent figure who steadfastly endeavored to honor his maker and to promote his faith. Most accounts also take pains to illustrate the massive armies that Prester John controlled, making the powerful priest-king an attractive military ally should his kingdom ever be discovered.

The origin of the legend of the mythical Christian potentate Prester John can be directly traced to evidentiary references dating back to the twelfth century, although the myth owes a significant debt to a number of earlier apocalyptic, literature, and geographical traditions. The legend’s influence on Europeans, however, continued to be exerted for centuries afterward, and helped fuel the European drives of exploration, and exploitation, and expansion in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. While this

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1 Admittedly the term “Europeans” is quite broad in definition. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term will be used to encompass Europeans not in a geographical or ethnic sense as much as people from the region known as Europe who had intellectual, political, military, or commercial interests in contact with regions outside of the territories considered to be “European” in the late medieval and early modern periods. In particular this term will be used to refer to individuals involved in exploration, exploitation, and expansion into Asia, Africa, and the Americas from the nations most involved in European expansion from the period of the Crusades through the beginning of the eighteenth century: England, France, Spain, Portugal, the Italian maritime city-states, and the Dutch Republic. Yet even this qualification fails to take into account groups on the conceptual margins of the study of Prester John, such as the belief by Russian Old Believers in a Japan-based Prester John, or the similarities between the Prester John legend and the idyllic earthly paradise envisioned by the Irish St. Brendan.
legendary priest-king was an amalgamation of literary traditions, fictional stereotypes, and historical figures, the pull of this fabled character on European geopolitical and economic ambitions was as strong as the metaphorical gravitational force that could have been exerted by any real-life human monarch.

This dissertation reinterprets the evolution, manifestations, and influence of the Prester John myth from its historical roots in central and eastern Asia to its “final” setting in Abyssinia. However, unlike most works on the subject, which typically begin with the twelfth-century writings of Otto of Freising, I argue that a more complete understanding of the legendary priest-king requires an analysis of the literary and intellectual traditions that created the ideal environment for the naissance of the Prester John saga. In addition, the influence that the Prester John legend exerted on the mindset of late medieval and early modern Europeans has been understated by many historians. This is, in part, due to the effects of periodization, whereby modern writers expect historical figures such as the Infante Dom Henrique, Christopher Columbus, and Duarte Lopes to behave in a rational and modern - rather than a medieval - fashion. This historiographical orthodoxy solidified around the beginning of the twentieth century, as exemplified by the following passage by Walter Alexander Raleigh, fellow at Merton College, Oxford, delineating the accepted view of the supposed decline of the Prester John legend by the end of the fifteenth century:

The reports brought by these [medieval] travellers of the survival of some remnants of Nestorian Christianity in the East lent colour to the legend of Prester

\[2\] As discussed in Chapters VI and VII of this dissertation, not all early modern Europeans accepted the claim by the Portuguese to have discovered the kingdom of Prester John in central Africa.
John, the mythical Christian potentate, who continued to be an object of research down to the time of the Portuguese voyages [emphasis added].³

Even scholars who have extensively worked on the specialized topic of Prester John exhibit this tendency toward historiographical orthodoxy. Meir Bar-Ilan argued that “in the 17th century, after the Europeans had learned that there was no one by the name of Prester John living in Ethiopia, the story was abandoned and considered a legend.”⁴

Moreover, as this study demonstrates, the influence of this legendary priest-king continued into the eighteenth century, far later than the traditional literature suggests of a decline in the influence of the legend by the first few decades of the sixteenth century.

Finally, this dissertation reevaluates the role that the Prester John myth played with regard to specific European voyages of exploration, expansion, and exploitation, and analyzes contemporary history textbooks to demonstrate the extent to which Prester John has been systematically written out of the story of European expansion.

The current study reexamines primary source documents in an effort to determine both the historical basis for the myth as well as the stimulus that it provided towards shaping European understanding of the world. Secondary sources are utilized both as historical references and as contrapuntal foils, while some secondary texts serve as primary sources of the attitudes of particular historians. This work also makes use of late medieval and early modern maps and woodcut illustrations in its analysis of the effects of the legend of Prester John on the period typically described as European expansion; while a variety of perspectives can be detected in this work, the textual

³ Walter Alexander Raleigh, in the introduction to The English Voyages of the Sixteenth Century (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons), 1910, 19.

analysis of new historicism has been an important influence on the author of the present
dissertation. Finally, this study analyzes survey-level high school and college textbooks
to demonstrate the extent to which the legend of Prester John “disappeared” from the
historical narrative in world history, European history, and Western civilization courses.

Since the trend in present-day historiography is toward narrow temporal,
geographic, and topical specialization – and this tendency is especially pronounced in the
dissertations of university doctoral students – the present work might at first glance seem
impossibly broad. Primary sources spanning over a dozen languages are far beyond the
ability of even a linguistic savant, and material that connects with historical observers
separated by more than one thousand years and five continents demands familiarity with
historiography in more disciplinary fields than many historians use in a lifetime. Yet this
re-examination of Prester John might perhaps be considered to be that narrowest of
specialized studies, the simple biography. Our subject, however, is a historical figure
whose influential “life” spanned more than six centuries, and whose distant “home”
periodically relocated to a variety of imagined kingdoms in the mythical Indies.

Yet in a twenty-first century of increasing globalization and a rising demand for
historians capable of working and teaching in world and global contexts, the legendary
character of Prester John is a vital and captivating topic worthy of greater scrutiny and
study. The European role in globalization – through increased exploration, trade, and
colonization – owes much to the late medieval and early modern fascination with the
mythical priest-king of the Indies. Without the lure of making political connections with
the supposed co-religionist Prester John in the struggle against the Islamic world, the
European history of overseas expansions would likely have taken a different course.
In addition, the Prester John legend existed as a sort of precursor to the rise of the academic Orientalism described by Edward Said. Marina Tolmacheva noted that this emerging Orientalism in the 17th century was “occasioned by three major factors: a renewed interest in Islam, major advances in travel and exploration, and the emergence of modern approaches to science and education.” The kingdom of Prester John was an amalgamation of exotic lands, often described as bordering on an earthy Paradise, which contrasted with the familiar world known to late medieval and early modern Europeans. It was the desire to link up with this wealthy Oriental king – whose Christian realm would make a superb ally in the struggles with the Islamic world – that helped drive European expansionism, while providing contemporaries with “proof” of the supposedly alien nature of the Oriental world.

Secondary Literature on the Prester John Legend

There has yet to be developed – until the present dissertation – a comprehensive examination of the origins of the Prester John legend that also provides an overview of the far-reaching nature of the priest-king’s appeal to medieval and early modern minds. Quite a few historians have examined particular aspects of the legend in larger works on medieval travel literature, papal embassies, or early European expansion, while others have focused on the legend in narrow time periods or individual attempts by historical figures to seek out Prester John. Still other secondary works focus on interpretations of the legend, or undertake textual critiques of the extant literature from late medieval and early modern authors who wrote about Prester John. A few historians also devoted a

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significant amount of research in related specialized pursuits, as for example efforts to uncover the original author of such documents as the 1165 Letter of Prester John to Byzantine emperor Emanuel Comnenos. This was perhaps the key moment at which the career of the legendary Prester John figure caught fire, and the moment at which this mystical priest-king began to fascinate European minds.

Perhaps one of the most important reasons why the Prester John legend has never been comprehensively addressed is because this topic requires a historian willing and capable of working with material that covers over one thousand years of recorded history and spanning most of the continents on the planet. A historian desirous of examining the entire history of the legend must be well versed in European, African, and Asian history, must be cognizant of historiographical trends in at least a dozen sub-fields, and must be a scholar willing to pore over texts in at least a half-dozen languages. Moreover, such a historian needs to be able to make associative connections across these linguistic, geographic, and temporal barriers, skills that are not highly prized in an academic discipline that rewards and encourages constricted specialization. In addition, cross-disciplinary familiarity with literature in fields as diverse as geography, history, literature, and cartography is essential in the study of a broad topic like this. While this author runs the risk of offending some members of the academy with these statements, the fact remains that modern historians learn the business of history by embracing specialization, and often remain captives of this mindset of narrow research interests for most or all of their careers.

An additional explanation for the lack of secondary examinations of the legend of Prester John involves the fictive nature of the character. Historians, as generalized group,
tend to be more concerned with “real” history, focusing on people, places, and events that actually existed, as opposed to the fabricated and fabled nature of Prester John. As a result, many historians view myths and legends as more properly the province of scholars of literature and language than of history. After all, mythical and legendary figures never actually acted in a physical sense, and thus never left behind any “real” history for scholars to examine. The Prester John legend, however, was quite “real” to the monarchs, explorers, travelers, and writers who believed in the existence of the priest-king, and this myth affected human behavior and the evolution of history for many centuries.

One of the first scholars to examine the Prester John legend in any critical fashion was Sir Clements Robert Markham, a British geographer and explorer who was President of the Royal Geographical Society from 1893-1905. In a pair of detailed articles published in 1867 Markham detailed the Portuguese expeditions to Abyssinia in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. The author described the kingdom of Portugal as a “hero nation” that “took the lead in all great enterprises”7 during the earliest centuries of European exploration and expansion. Markham argued that the Portuguese desire to create an alliance with the fabled Prester John was an important consideration for Dom Henrique and King João II in their efforts to fund expeditions of exploration, and that the 1487-88 discovery of and passage beyond the *Cabo da Boa Esperança* by Bartolomeu Dias created a sense of urgency for the Portuguese crown to locate the mythical priest-king:

King John II saw the importance of collecting information in the East with reference to the possibility of turning the rich trade of the Indies into the new channel; and he was also anxious to discover the dominions of the Christian ruler,

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called Prester John, who had been reported by the Venetian Marco Polo to reign in the far east.\(^8\)

An essential starting point of any research into the legend of Prester John is the work of Friedrich Zarncke, a nineteenth century philologist from the University of Leipzig who collected, translated, and edited nearly one hundred Latin manuscripts that were related to the mythical priest-king. Unfortunately for non-German speaking scholars there are no English translations of his analysis of the documents, although Zarncke’s translations remain the definitive sources for the earliest mentions of Prester John in European literature.\(^9\) Zarncke is also noted for his successful freeing of the original *Letter of Prester John* from textual additions by later transcribers.\(^10\)

Beazley also addressed the legend of Prester John in his work on the Portuguese prince Dom Henrique, better known to English readers as Prince Henry the Navigator. Like Markham, Beazley asserted that the drive to link up with a powerful Christian confederate was among the chief motivations for the House of Aviz in financing the exploratory voyages of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries:

During all the years that he had waged his cruel war against the Muslims of Africa and Granada… he had sought in vain for the Christian friends and helpers of whom the pontiffs speak – for the “One Christian king,” the “one lord outside this land” who for the love of Christ would aid him in this war. Yet to find such an ally remained the object of his unwearied search, and in the half-true tale of Prester John, the priest-king cut off by a waste of heathendom from the main body

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\(^8\) Ibid.


of the Faithful, but staunchly upholding the faith of the Cross in the depths of the East, he gained an inspiration.\footnote{11}{C. Raymond Beazley, “Prince Henry of Portugal and the African Crusade of the Fifteenth Century,” \textit{The American Historical Review}, 16:1 (Oct. 1910), 18.}

Beazley believed that the origin of the Prester John legend was an unnamed “Tatar chieftain”\footnote{12}{Ibid.} near the Lake Baikal region, and that the location of the kingdom of Prester John would later be transferred by Europeans to the Negus of Abyssinia. He added that Portuguese hopes of finding Prester John were “hotly revived in 1486”\footnote{13}{Ibid., 22.} with the expedition of João Afonso d'Aveiros, who reported that the West African potentate Ogane might be the long sought priest-king of European legends.\footnote{14}{Ibid.}

Hime examined the Prester John legend in his analysis of the 1590 travel narrative of Edward Webbe, an English soldier in Moscow during the 1571 sacking of the city by the Tatars. Webbe spent five years in Tatar captivity, being feed in the Crimea in 1576. Hime argued that much of Webbe’s narrative – especially the lengthy passages related to Prester John – “bear so close a resemblance to Mandeville’s that it is unnecessary to dwell upon them.”\footnote{15}{Henry William Lovett Hime, “The Travels of Edward Webbe,” \textit{The English Historical Review}, 31:123 (Jul. 1916), 465-66.} Hime, by training a military historian, had little use for the portions of Webbe’s narrative that deviated from established reality, and scorned sixteenth century readers who “accepted without question a relation of exploits as fictitious as those of Captain Carleton.”\footnote{16}{Ibid., 470. Hime refers to the 1728 novel \textit{The Memoirs of Captain Carleton}, attributed either to Daniel Defoe or Jonathan Swift. Nineteenth century historians sometimes confused this work of fiction for}
as conjured by the fertile imagination (and plagiaristic pen) of Webbe; the following passage is exemplary of such rhetoric:17

When Webbe reaches the wars of the Turks with the Persians he fairly quits the domain of history and enters into the region of romance. He does not, indeed, visit the Dark Land through which Alexander the Great passed in his vain search for the Fountain of Life, but he enters the realm of the fabulous Prester John. Some of the marvels he describes seem to be taken with variations from Mandeville; but to leave no doubt of his having personally witnessed at least one of the wonders he relates, he tells us (p. 25) that there were ‘three score and seventeen unicorns and elephants all alive at one time, and they were so tame that I played with them as one would play with lambs.’18

Manning focused on a particular dimension of the Russian manifestations of the Prester John legend, and the author noted that the discontent among seventeenth century Old Believers added a different twist to the myth: Prester John’s realm became an earthly paradise for religious dissenters. Interestingly, for Old Believers location of the kingdom of Prester John was in Japan,19 suggesting a commonality in the belief in far-off, little known lands as wellsprings of paradise between the Western European and Russian versions of the legend.

A version of the Prester John letter, entitled *The Tale of the Indian Kingdom*, reached select Russian readers in 1165. This document, supposedly composed by the Tsar-Priest John to be delivered to Emperor Manuel Comnenos of Constantinople, seems to draw from the same origins as contemporaneous letters from Prester John that appeared in Western Europe in the mid-twelfth century. Manning argued that Tsarevich

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17 Webbe’s narrative is examined in greater detail in Chapter VI of this study.

18 Ibid., 466.

Andronikos, an adversary of Manuel, might have played a role in the dissemination of the letter, arguing that Andronikos could have used the Prester John myth as a means of persuading the Russians that Manuel “was not the most powerful ruler in the whole world.”

Manning provided several excerpts of the Russian version of the letter in which the author – writing in a first person voice as Prester John – dismisses Emperor Manuel, who is presented in a less-than-flattering manner with an element of disdainful haughtiness:

Tell your tsar Manuel: if you wish to know all my resources and the wonders of my realm of India, sell your Grecian realm and buy paper and come to my kingdom of India with your scribes and I will let you make an inventory of my land of India and you will not be able to make an inventory of my kingdom before your death.

When looking back at late medieval and early modern Europeans, it is admittedly difficult to decisively quantify the extent to which people accepted the myth of Prester John. Ross examined the earliest Portuguese embassies to Ethiopia and - while noting that Portuguese monarchs were indeed in search of the mythical priest-king – downplayed the idea that leaders such as João I, Dom Henrique, and Manoel I were seeking a powerful and wealthy ally. This argument contradicts the vast majority of contemporary historical accounts and secondary literature on Portuguese motives in overseas expansion. The author, however, did not provide any evidence that the Portuguese and other Europeans fascinated with Prester John were particularly skeptical of the Prester John legend:

The name Abyssinia is said to be derived from the Arabic habash, to collect, and the country is always spoken of by the Portuguese as Ethiopia, while the inhabitants are called “Abexins.” Of the strange beliefs which prevailed in the Middle Ages, that this was the country ruled over by Prester John, that the mountains were all of pure gold, and that the children played at marbles with big

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20 Ibid., 291.
diamonds, this is not the place to speak... About the same period [1486] information reached Portugal of a mighty kingdom in the East governed by a Christian monarch. It was presumed that this was the Emperor of Abyssinia, to whom certain Eastern travelers had given the name of ‘Prester John.’"  

The statements by Ross are typical of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century historical approach to understanding the legend of Prester John. For such scholars, dominated by the contemporary emphasis on rationalism and scientism in academia, belief by historical figures in a fanciful personage such as Prester John must have seemed difficult to reconcile with their understanding of exploration figures such as Columbus acting as rational, visionary innovators. Such dismissive attitudes by historians toward the legend of Prester John – a figure mentioned by most of the influential writers in the early centuries of European expansion – continued well into the twentieth century. 

The writings of Charles F. Rey also fall into this category of relatively haughty dismissiveness toward late medieval and early modern efforts to locate the kingdom of Prester John. *The Romance of the Portuguese in Abyssinia* alternates between disdain toward anything Lusitanian and a grudging respect for the persistence of the Portuguese in their steadfast efforts to locate and build alliances with the kings of Abyssinia. Even while admiring the “energy and imagination” of Henry the Navigator, Rey felt compelled to add that “it is gratifying to us to know that this great patron of travellers was partly of English blood.”  

The Portuguese, noted Rey in a bit of colonialist chest-thumping, failed to “benefit or advance Abyssinia or its people from either the moral or material

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point of view,” ultimately “throwing back the country into deeper isolation” and “implanting in the minds of the people seeds of suspicion of all foreign enterprise, religious and other.” At times the text devolves into the Eurocentric racism that was typical of the early twentieth century, as evidenced by the following passage:

[I]t was the glory and pride of a savage king to have a white man at his court, and the kings of Abyssinia were glad to have a tame white man of their own; that kind of complimentary captivity was a danger to which African travellers were always exposed, and it was one from which Covilham [Pero da Covilhã] was not to escape. 

Even setting aside the inherent racism and ethnocentrism in Rey’s work, *The Romance of the Portuguese in Abyssinia* offers little for modern researchers. The text is almost entirely devoid of footnotes, and there are few in-text clues to help readers understand the origin of quotes. Moreover, Rey’s obvious distaste for Roman Catholicism – as evidenced by his descriptions of Portuguese Bishop Oviedo as an “intolerant bigot” and Ignatius Loyola as a “fanatic” – call into question Rey’s ability to dispassionately analyze any aspect of Portuguese endeavors in Africa, and at the very least, the work in separating Rey’s biases from his analyses make the text largely unusable for a modern researcher who seeks information on the evolution of the legend of Prester John.

One of the first works to attempt to understand the late medieval *mentalité* with regard to Prester John is Elaine Sanceau’s *The Land of Prester John*. The text is limited in the sense that Sanceau focused solely on the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century

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23 Ibid., 301.

24 Ibid., 25.

25 Ibid., 205.
embassies of the Portuguese to Ethiopia, but the author recognized that Prester John was a very real figure in the minds of many Europeans. Dom Henrique, argued Sanceau, “sought to penetrate the undiscovered world” and “never lost sight of the East and Prester John.”

Dom João II, though unlike the “star-gazing mystic” Henrique, nonetheless recognized that Prester John represented a key to both the seaborne route to the Indies as well as an important ally against Islam. Portuguese monarchs and explorers, argued Sanceau, engaged in an “age-long quest after the land of Prester John” for reasons akin to “man’s search for the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Moreover, maintained Sanceau, Portuguese ambitions in seeking out Prester John took on loftier, more ethereal dimensions:

Yet we must remember that none of these pioneers went to seek material profit. This is a strangely disinterested chapter in the story of mankind. Neither Afonso de Paiva, who died alone in Moslem lands, nor Pero da Covilham, who left his home forever, nor Duarte Galvão, dying on the island of Kamaran while gazing longingly across the burning waves of the Red Sea towards the land of Prester John, nor Dom Cristóvão and his gay young volunteers, marching, as their elders guessed, to certain death, nor the Jesuit fathers who faced the Turkish scimitars and horrible captivity in nameless dungeons – one of these men were striving after earthly treasure. They were pursuing an ideal, a will-o’-the-wisp thing that always ran before them.

Certainly Sanceau’s romantic depiction of the Portuguese ambassadors to Ethiopia ignores the inherent material and geopolitical motivations of these figures, but the author recognized that late medieval and early modern minds did not necessarily

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27 Ibid., 13.

28 Ibid., 14.

29 Ibid., 230.

30 Ibid.
conform to modern, anachronistic assumptions of rational thought processes. Instead, these were explorers and emissaries whose feet were firmly planted in the medieval soil that was fertilized with legends and myths that dated back to the classical Mediterranean world.

Like other historians interested in the topic of Prester John, Douglas Morton Dunlop was curious about the origins of the legendary character, and this particular author noted the similarities between the account of Otto of Friesing and the historical example of the Karait, an Asian people whose leaders at times professed a Nestorian Christianity between 1000 and 1300 CE. The Karait controlled a considerable amount of territory between the Great Wall and the Persian Empire until being overthrown by Genghis Khan in the twelfth century. Extant documents discuss the fact that some of the Karait leaders also exhibited priestly functions, in keeping with the Prester John legend. The powerful Karait, Dunlop argued, “came to control in fact a far larger territory than was ascribed to Prester John even by the imagination of the Middle Ages,” making the Karait a possible contemporary inspiration for the European belief in the legendary kingdom of Prester John.

Weckman noted the tendency of historians to ascribe modern characteristics on explorers such as Cortés and Columbus, who he described as “the last of the great

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32 Ibid., 279.

33 Ibid., 284.
mediaeval travelers” as opposed to the sort of forward-looking Renaissance figure depicted by many of the biographers of the Genovese icon. Columbus, argued Weckman, drew heavily on medieval writers (and especially from texts that provided narratives about Prester John), and he “never outgrew” the fantastic influences that shaped his conception of the world. The third voyage of Columbus, maintained Weckman, found the explorer claiming that he had reached the Terrestrial Paradise so often depicted in medieval travel narratives. Both Cortés and Columbus, noted the author, claimed to have found the mythical land of the Amazons, who were believed to live on the fringes of Scythia in Sarmatia; this legend of female warriors, which can be traced to Greek mythology, was often linked in medieval literature with narratives on the kingdom of Prester John. In addition, Spanish notions of a New World El Dorado bear particular similarities with the land believed to be ruled by Prester John.

One of the first modern writers to examine the power of the legend of Prester John on late medieval European minds was classicist Karl F. Helleiner, who argued that the “Far East, long regarded as a storehouse of marvels, under the influence of Prester John's Epistola became the enchanted country par excellence.” Helleiner added that for “centuries to come ‘the Indies’ to European man remained a symbol of exotic opulence, and Prester John the living witness to the triumphant progress of Christianity to the very

35 Ibid., 132.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 134.
confines of the earth. The age of the great geographical explorations and discoveries must be viewed against this background."  

Helleiner also used his knowledge of Greek and Latin to make a convincing argument about the original author of the Letter of Prester John:

I believe Prester John's letter was written, in part, as a piece of anti-Byzantine propaganda, perhaps by a man who served the political interests of the Norman princes of Sicily, or by a German (could it have been Wibald of Stablo by any chance?) who resented the monopolistic claims of the Greeks to the Imperial dignity, claims, be it remembered, that were very stoutly maintained by Manuel Comnenus.  

Perhaps the definitive text on the first century of Prester John literature is Vsevolod Slessarev's Prester John: The Letter and the Legend. The author included French and Latin versions of the Letter of Prester John, as well as a facsimile of the letter from the James Ford Bell Collection at the University of Minnesota. Slessarev argued that a cycle of Nestorian legends - in which Prester John played an important part - centered on St. Thomas, who was believed by many Christian traditions to have traveled to India after the Pentecost. Moreover, maintained Slessarev, St. Thomas had baptized a certain King Mazdai; a falling out with the Indian potentate resulted in St. Thomas being stabbed to death by royal soldiers. According to legend Mazdai's son, Vizan, took the remains of the martyred saint to a royal tomb, and Slessarev noted a number of

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 56.


42 The facsimile dates to approximately 1500 CE, and was originally printed in Paris. Slessarev noted that there were at least fourteen French editions of the Letter of Prester John.

striking philological and historical parallels between the St. Thomas and Prester John narratives. Slessarev’s text is an essential component of any research into the Prester John legend, and his work is highly recommended for graduate students and disciplinary specialists, both for the aforementioned Letter of Prester John as well as the book’s impressive bibliography.

Contemporaneous with the work of Slessarev – and a scholar who also worked out of the James Ford Bell archives at the University of Minnesota – historian Francis M. Rogers examined the religious motives behind the late medieval and early modern European drive for travel and discovery. His book *The Quest for Eastern Christians* provides a great deal of information about the first few centuries of the Prester John myth. Rogers noted that this “great nonexistent monarch” was one of the primary motivations for many European travelers and explorers. Scholars interested in the Prester John legend are strongly encouraged to examine this useful text, which includes an impressive bibliography of primary sources and secondary texts. Unfortunately, Rogers literally and figuratively closed the book on the legendary Prester John after the “dream [of Prester John and a union between the Western church and other branches of Christianity] reached fulfillment during the reign of King Manuel of Portugal (1495-1521),” and he argued that the Portuguese missions to the Ethiopian emperors meant that Europeans had discovered that Prester John no longer offered any value to them as an ally or as a trade partner. As we will see, European fascination with the legendary Prester John continued

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44 Ibid., 88 ff.


46 Ibid., 178.
well into the seventeenth century, and in some respects this mythical figure continued to fascinate European writers even farther into the future.

Among the historians dedicating a significant portion of their careers to the study of the legend of Prester John was Charles F. Beckingham, who held the chair of Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University. Prester John held a lifelong interest for Beckingham, and he contributed a number of key texts to the field. Beckingham collaborated with G.W.B. Huntingford on the translation of Manoel de Almeida’s *History of High Ethiopia*,\(^\text{47}\) and also edited an edition of James Bruce’s *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*.\(^\text{48}\) The author edited *The Hebrew Letters of Prester John* with Edward Ullendorff, which is a collection of documents written in Hebrew similar in content to the earliest Prester John letters that circulated in Europe during the twelfth century. Perhaps Beckingham’s most lasting contribution, though, was *Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes*, published three years before his death in 1999.\(^\text{49}\) This book combined original essays from a variety of scholars with three of Zarncke’s translations of the original Prester John letters, and the text has the added bonus of providing Zarncke’s original footnotes. In addition, Beckingham included an excerpt of an unpublished manuscript by A.A. Vasiliev that contains important research

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on the birth of the Prester John legend in Russia. The Beckingham-Ullendorff compilation brings a wide variety of disparate material to a much larger academic audience, and the text demonstrates the possibilities of renewed research into the legend of Prester John.

Russian historian and ethnographer Lev Gumilev contributed a monograph on the Prester John legend that was not available in an English language translation until 1987. Gumilev focused on drawing connections between Prester John and Genghis Khan, building on previous work by Western historians. Scholars interested in the Prester John legend, however, will find little material in Gumilev’s work that was not already available in earlier texts, and this text has value only as an introductory book for Russian-language scholars. Denis Sinor described Gumilev’s book as “at best, a historical novel,” and researchers interested in the Prester John legend would be well advised to seek out other texts.

The presence of a form of the Prester John legend among Russian Old Believers was the subject of an article by Charles Augustus Manning. He argued that the Old Believers “regarded the entire Russian Church as apostate” and that they “turned eagerly to the East to recover the lost hierarchy.” The island of Japan fit the needs of these would-be purifiers of the Orthodox faith in the same fashion that the fabled Indies served.


as the home for Prester John to western Europeans, argued Manning. The Old Believer search for the Orthodox version of Prester John in the seventeenth century resulted in members of numerous expeditions “perishing in the wilderness and deserts of the heart of Asia.”

The history of the Old Believer search for their own version of the legendary Prester John provides for interesting comparisons with the experiences of Western Europeans as they sought out the mythical ruler of the Three Indies.

The Prester John myth continues to interest a few scholars from a variety of disciplines, and a recent work by Nicholas Jubber examines the legend using an unusual method: the modern travelogue. In the tradition of European adventurers, Jubber and a companion seek to retrace the steps of one Master Philip, a physician to Pope Alexander III who was chosen by the pontiff in 1177 to deliver a reply to one of the Prester John letters. Much of the text is devoted to an examination of the changes between the twelfth century world of Philip and that of the modern world, providing some interesting counterpoints in an age when there is a dearth of Western on-the-ground narratives from the Middle East and Central Asia. There is no record of Philip after he left for the kingdom of Prester John, and Jubber can only speculate on what might have befallen the papal physician en route to Ethiopia, but the narrative poses some thoughtful conjectures about the basis for the Prester John legend.

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54 Ibid.

55 Jubber seems convinced that the kingdom of Prester John and that of the Ethiopian Negus were one and the same during the entirety of the time that the legend held sway in Europe. Unfortunately, few historians are in agreement with arguments that Europeans steadfastly adhered to the notion of an entirely African basis for the legend of Prester John.
Similar in approach is a recent article by writer Johnny Wyld, who used the Prester John legend as the basis for a modern-day Central Asian travelogue. Wyld and companions began their journey in Istanbul, traveled next to Tbilisi, ferried across the Caspian Sea, and the rode the Trans-Caspian railway to Samarkand and Ecbatana. While the article offers little in the way of value to the specialist, Wyld astutely noted that the legend of Prester John has faded from historical discourse, especially as one travels farther from Europe: “the historians we met in Jizzax [Jizzax Politexnika Institutida in Uzbekistan] had never heard of Prester John, and this is not surprising. His legend never caught hold in the imagination of people living in Central Asia, and why should it?”

An intriguing newer contribution by anthropologist Manuel João Ramos reinterprets the Prester John through the lens of textual analysis. Drawing on the structuralist work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ramos prepared a series of essays that examine components of the Letter of Prester John. The author chided historians who make a priori assumptions about the belief systems of late medieval and early modern Europeans. In the following passage, Ramos described the ways in which nineteenth and twentieth century historians have embraced dubious models and questionable generalizations about medieval Europeans:

Hence, it may be said that, based upon the study of these types of text and upon the supposition that the medieval readers were unable not to believe, any modeling made about an hypothetical medieval or renaissance system of cosmographical, sociological, and religious beliefs regarding the eastern world, is evidently inductive and highly questionable.

57 Ibid., 12
The analyses of Ramos on the legend of Prester John point to a stronger linkage between the priest-king and the Christian traditions surround St. Thomas. Ramos also briefly noted a major theme elucidated in this dissertation, which is that there exist a considerable number of parallels between the Prester John myth and certain apocalyptic and millenialist traditions among Near East Christians. Ramos noted that instead of viewing the Prester John legend as a phenomenon that rose only after the arrival of the fraudulent letters of Prester John, scholars should be aware that the letters themselves draw upon existing literary traditions that would immediately resonate with their medieval readers.

Yet despite the excellent work by many of the aforementioned scholars on various aspects of the Prester John legend, there has yet to be developed a comprehensive overview of the mythical priest-king across artificial temporal boundaries and one that examines the assorted guises constructed for him by different European writers. The present study seeks not only to synthesize some of the work of earlier scholars, but to reassess some aspects of the legend that have become canonized into an orthodox historiographical tradition. It is the intention of the author of this dissertation to examine the legend of Prester John in its historical and geographical entirety, as well as to document the extent to which “modern” European thinkers continued to believe in the existence of this mythical priest-king into the eighteenth century and beyond.

The study of the evolution of the legend of Prester John begins a thousand years or more before the first letter appeared in Europe purportedly penned by the mythical priest-king. The authors of the fraudulent letters – or, in a less condemnatory sense, the purveyors of exotic Asian tales – drew from an established canon of literature and

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traditions in their creation of the “proofs” of the existence of a powerful Eastern king who might be a valuable ally against the Islamic world. The second chapter of this dissertation examines the literary and theoretical foundations upon which the legend of Prester John rested. It should become apparent to readers of this dissertation that the fantastic tales of the distant lands of Prester John did not emerge from a literary vacuum, but that these narratives reflected longstanding geographical, literary, and religious traditions that contemporary readers would immediately recognize.
Chapter Two

The Influence of European Apocalyptic, Romance, and Geographical Perspectives on the Evolution of the Prester John Legend

While Europeans in the Roman era participated in trade networks with counterparts in Asia, it would be disingenuous to suggest that there was any meaningful amount of reliable information available to people in Europe about the realms and societies that existed east of what is today known as the Iranian Plateau. What few factual details that did emerge in medieval Europe about Central, Southern, and Eastern Asia via the Silk Road and other East-West routes blended with myths, legends, and fabrications to produce an imagined Orient that bore little relation to the peoples and states of contemporary Asia. Moreover, most of sub-Saharan Africa remained largely a mystery to Europeans until the modern era, and of course the Americas were a wholly unknown pair of continents.

In addition, there are structural components of Christianity that contributed to the desire by European Christians to look eastward in their eagerness to better understand their religion. Visiting the Holy Land often meant arduous travel for medieval Christians, and as Mary B. Campbell perceptively noted, "Christianity is in fact the first Western religion in which the sacred territory is located emphatically Elsewhere."¹ This geographical division – or perhaps “severance” might be a more appropriate term to use –

between the Christian West and its most sacred sites was underscored after the Crusades, when exotic relics and strange narratives began to return with the returning warriors and the entourages.

The late medieval travel narratives, papal embassies, and trade delegations that produced the body of literature that later served in the European expeditions of exploration drew heavily on earlier classical traditions of literature, geography, and cartography. As we will see, the Greco-Roman understanding of the East proved to be enduring and highly influential on the narratives of many of the important figures who produced travel literature in the late medieval and early modern eras. This chapter briefly profiles some of the classical and medieval geographers whose works reflect elements of the legendary kingdom of Prester John, and these geographical and rhetorical continuities underscore the argument that the fabrication of letters from Prester John merely reinforced existing ideas that Europeans already possessed about the regions supposedly ruled by the mythical priest-king.

*Strabo*

One of the most influential classical texts to influence late medieval geographical thought was the 17-volume *Geographica* by the first century CE Greek writer Strabo of Amasia, an Augustan-era historian and geographer. The writer’s name is of some interest, as the word translates as “cross-eyed” or “squinty-eyed,” though Strabo earned a deserved reputation as a keen-eyed observer. Strabo claimed to have been widely

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2 Sarah Pothecary, “Strabo the Geographer: His Name and Its Meaning,” *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series 52:6 (Dec., 1999), 691-704. Pothecary suggested that the name Strabo “was the personal name given to our geographer by his parents, in either the stand-alone format or as a cognomen in the tria nomina format,” and that the nearsighted connotations of “Strabo” may be coincidental.
traveled, perhaps more so than any classical contemporaries, and he recorded visits to places as distant as the Ligurian Sea, the Black Sea, and the Upper Nile River. Along the way he picked up details about distant lands that provided the source material for his *Geographica* and *Historia*. There is little argument among historians about the profound influence Strabo exerted on medieval and early modern understandings of the Earth’s geography. One historian described Strabo as “the most famous geographer known throughout medieval times and one who was also appreciated by humanists, especially for his consideration of the sphere and the celestial aspects of the universe in his *Geography*. Strabo’s *Geographica* “remained a standard text in Europe well into the Renaissance,” and this impressive staying power owed much to Strabo’s encyclopedic approach as well as his use of such trusted scientific disciplines as geometry, astronomy, and physics in his descriptions of the Earth. Thus, late medieval and early modern writers who studied Strabo’s *Geographica* could “prove” his assertions in ways that literary-based geographies failed.

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4 Strabo’s *Historia* is almost completely lost, though references to it exist in the works of other classical writers, including Strabo’s own *Geographica*. The University of Milan possesses a papyrus fragment of *Historia*, and there are at least sixteen references to Strabo’s Historia in the works of authors such as Tertullian, Plutarch, and Josephus. For an excellent short essay on *Historia*, see Dueck, 69-75.


7 Dueck, 156-157.
Readers can find a number of medieval traditions and beliefs related to the world beyond the Mediterranean in the writings of Strabo, the original texts of which had been composed one millennia or more in the past. The fourth chapter of *Geographica* examines the Alexandrine partition of the world into Hellenic and barbarian spheres, in keeping with traditional views of the world, but Strabo equated the presence of Roman civilization (or lack thereof) in a given region as an indicator of the relative moral worth of the particular people being studied.\(^8\) This idea of Alexander the Great as the person responsible for somehow “protecting” the civilized world from the walled-off barbaric hordes is a regular feature of late medieval thought, and will be further explored in later sections of this chapter. The fourth chapter of *Geographica* is also noteworthy for its numbering of three continents in the world: Europe, Asia, and Libya. This tripartite continental theme is the basis of medieval T-O maps, also profiled later in this chapter of the present dissertation.

Strabo reiterated the classical tradition of the mythical island of Thule, which he described as “six days' sail north of Britain, and is near the frozen sea,” though he noted about Thule that “our historical information is still more uncertain, on account of its outside position.”\(^9\) Though the island of Thule is not necessarily associated with any versions of the Prester John legend, it does represent the sort of far-off land that served as a beacon to later explorers and their sponsors. More relevant to the legend of Prester John is the Greek tradition of the Blessed Isles, also known as the Elysian Fields, a place believed to be the final resting place of the souls of heroic and virtuous persons. Strabo, while taking a fairly rational approach to such metaphysical matters, wrote that “certain

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\(^8\) Dueck, 172.

\(^9\) Strabo, *Geographica*, 4.5.1.
Isles of the Blest, which, as we know, are still now pointed out, not very far from the headlands of Maurusia that lie opposite to Gades [Cádiz].”⁠¹⁰ The peacefulness of the Elysian Fields, according to Strabo, was fitting for such blessed souls: “the pure air and the gentle breezes of Zephyrus properly belong to this country, since the country is not only in the west but also warm; and the phrase ‘at the ends of the earth’ properly belongs to it, where Hades has been ‘mythically placed,’ as we say.”⁠¹¹ Later medieval writers made a connection between the Elysian Fields of classical traditions and the idea of an Earthy Paradise, which was a feature of many of the legends associated with the kingdom of Prester John.

*Pliny the Elder*

Among the classical writers whose writings had significant influence on late medieval and early modern European understandings of global geography and civilizations was Pliny the Elder, a first century Roman military official and confidante of the emperor Vespasian. His best known work – and one that survived largely intact through the medieval period – is the *Naturalis Historia*, an encyclopedic collection with the audacious intention to synthesize the entire body of classical knowledge. Pliny claimed to have collected 20,000 pieces of information from some 2,000 volumes composed by over one hundred authors.⁠¹²

Pliny offered quite a few observations that would mystify medieval minds and spark interest in the world beyond the Mediterranean. He noted that the blood of a goat

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⁠¹⁰ Ibid., 3.2.13.

⁠¹¹ Ibid.

could split a diamond, the hardest substance known to mankind.\textsuperscript{13} Like many classical writers, Pliny sought to understand the location of the Fortunate Islands, which he like Strabo he described as “seven hundred and fifty miles distant from Gades [modern-day Cádiz].”\textsuperscript{14} Among the fantastic creatures Pliny reported could be found in lands to the east was a certain sacred firebird: “Arabia has a bird, noteworthy before all others...the phoenix, the only one in the whole world and not seen very much.”\textsuperscript{15} Pliny reported on the Arimaspi, a legendary people who possessed only one eye and who were believed to be located in northern Scythia.\textsuperscript{16} Other unusual humanoid creatures documented by Pliny that would become a staple in medieval legends related to the kingdom of Prester John were the Blemmyæ, who were “said to have no heads, their mouths and eyes being seated in their breasts.”\textsuperscript{17} Also in keeping with later accounts of the lands supposedly controlled by Prester John, Pliny reported that “The kings of Æthiopia are said even at the present day to be forty-five in number.”\textsuperscript{18}

Pliny also discussed the presence of a blue-eyed, red-haired people who lived somewhere beyond the Himalaya Mountains,\textsuperscript{19} physical features that were decidedly European and an idea that would be consistent with later European ideas of the presence of the kingdom of Prester John in Asia. These people, described by Pliny as the “Seres,”

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{13}{Ibid., 37.59-60.}
\footnote{14}{Ibid., 6.37.}
\footnote{15}{Ibid., 10.3-5. The often skeptical Pliny struggles with this report, adding that he is “inclined to think factiously” about the phoenix.}
\footnote{16}{Ibid., 4.88-89.}
\footnote{17}{Ibid., 5.8.}
\footnote{18}{Ibid., 6.35}
\footnote{19}{Ibid., 6.88.}
\end{footnotes}
were believed to be the producers of the silk that was in such high demand in Europe, a product that could not yet be replicated in Europe and one that sparked a variety of creative explanations for its physical origins.

Certainly Pliny’s writings do not lack for the presence of the fantastic, despite his professed skepticism. Yet one of the curious phenomena related to Pliny is that even when he questioned the dubious accounts of creatures and places that seem fanciful by modern standards, Pliny still gave these imaginative tales credence by including them in a text that purported to be a font of classical knowledge. As we will see, medieval writers struggled to come to grips with the received wisdom of classical writers, even when it might be patently absurd.

*Marinus of Tyre and Ptolemy*

The Phoenician mathematician, cartographer, and geographer Marinus of Tyre is widely credited as creating the first maps that designated a specific longitude and latitude to each point, and his second century CE work significantly influenced that of Ptolemy. Yet despite the important contributions of Marinus, his Egyptian protégé soon became the standard source of geographical knowledge in the medieval world; Nunn noted that “Ptolemy's geography so completely replaced the geography of Marinus of Tyre that it is only through him that we know of Marinus.”20 It was not until the late fifteenth century and the *erdapl* of Martin Behaim that the brilliance of Marinus began to once again be

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appreciated by European geographers.²¹ Randles noted the high esteem with which Columbus held Marinus:

Columbus, in his letter of 7 July 1503, refers to Portuguese voyages far southward along the African coast beyond the equator, to justify his preference for Marinus of Tyre's east-west extension of the oikumene (225 degrees as against Ptolemy's 180 degrees), for 'Marinus', wrote Columbus, 'makes Africa extend to 24 degrees Lat S., a latitude which the Portuguese have confirmed.'²²

A number of sixteenth and seventeenth century geographers used a modified Marinus projection in their work. Among these included the maps of Robert Thorne (1527) Jacobus Ziegler's maps of Scandinavia and Palestine (1532), and the imitations of the maps of Jacob van Deventer produced by Michele Tramezini (1558).²³ Other noteworthy cartographers influenced by Marinus included Ortelius and his *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (1570), G. de Jode's *Speculum orbis terrarum* (1578), and the maps in the first atlas of the New World produced by Cornelis Wytfliet (1597).²⁴ Yet one of the most important contributors to human geographic and cartographic knowledge that Marinus influenced lived much closer in time than these early modern devotees.

Educated late medieval and early modern Europeans – especially those involved in geography, travel, and/or exploration – held a particular fondness for the work of Claudius Ptolemaeus, better known to the West as Ptolemy. This Egyptian-born mathematician, geographer, and astronomer influenced Western views of the globe for

²¹ Some geographers, especially Nunn, dispute the idea that the idea that Behaim and Columbus owed any debt of gratitude to Marinus., who considered the similarities in the size of the Earth by the three men to be merely coincidental. Nunn concluded: “Apart from the matter of the longitude of Cattigara, Columbus and Marinus of Tyre had nothing in common concerning the geographical concepts of eastern Asia.” See especially Nunn, “Marinus of Tyre's Place in the Columbus Concepts.”


²⁴ Ibid., 15.
the better part of two millennia, and while the forgers involved in creating the various Letters of Prester John may not have read the works of this classical intellectual, they certainly described a world much in keeping with the planet as Ptolemy depicted it in works like *Geographia*.

A controversy exists among geographers over the extent to which Ptolemy’s work borrowed from the work of other classical geographers, especially Marinus of Tyre. Setting aside the issue of the assignment of modern notions of scholarship to long-dead classical figures, several geographers have weighed in on the matter. Riley argued that Ptolemy built upon and improved the calculations of Marinus:

> Since Marinus' *Geography* has not survived, we cannot establish how much Ptolemy changed his figures. I suspect that Ptolemy's detailed critique...comprises the total number of changes that Ptolemy made to Marinus' data and that Ptolemy kept Marinus' basic frame-work, simply making it more accurate and more suitable for his projection system.\(^{25}\)

Ptolemy’s *Geographia* remained lost to western Europeans until 1400, when a copy of the text arrived in Florence from Constantinople. A Latin translation became available in 1410, and editions of *Geographia* began to be printed in 1475. Historical geographer Denis Cosgrove discussed the profound changes that Ptolemaic texts began to have on European cartography in the following passage:

> Not only did Ptolemy revolutionize the modes of global and large-scale geographical representation available to Europeans, but the divergence between his geographical claims and the direct experience of the world reported by Renaissance navigators and others raised a host of conceptual and practical questions that occupied geographers and others, not least in Venice, throughout the sixteenth century.\(^{26}\)


There are quite a few elements of the later versions of the various Prester John legends that can be found in the writings of Ptolemy. One should exercise caution, however, in assuming direct links between Ptolemy and the evolution of the legendary Prester John, as Ptolemy’s *Geographia* was lost to western Europe until the late fourteenth century. Print editions of the work did not appear until 1477.

Among the geographical features consistent between Ptolemy’s *Geographia* and the legend of Prester John was the idea of a snow-capped mountain range that served as the source of the Nile River. Ptolemy referred to these as the “Mountains of the Moon,” and this magical landform was a regular feature of many of the accounts of the kingdom of Prester John. In the following passage Ptolemy described the importance of these hypothetical mountains:

> Around this bay the Aethiopian Anthropophagi dwell, and from these toward the west are the Mountains of the Moon, from which the lakes of the Nile receive snow water; they are located at the extreme limits of the Mountains of the Moon.27

Though lost in manuscript form to Europeans until 1406 CE, the writings of Ptolemy in *Geographia* still influenced later medieval writers of works on cosmography and geography who had access to texts or earlier Ptolemaic references. The rediscovery of Ptolemy’s *Geographia* in the fifteenth century and its translation into Latin by Jacopo d’Angelo are “landmarks in the history of Western cartography”28 that had a profound influence on both European mapmaking and the persistence of the Prester John legend,

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many details of which could be “proven” by their similarities to elements of the classical geography and cosmography of Ptolemy.

Beatus of Liébana

Beatus of Liébana was an eighth-century monk, theologian, and geographer from the Iberian kingdom of Asturias whose Commentaria In Apocalypsin (Commentary on the Apocalypse, or commonly known simply as the Beatus) remained an important text in European academic circles for many centuries. Beatus intended the work to be used “by religious communities as a devotional aid, as material for the preparation of homilies, and as a guide to the coming end of the world.”29 No copy of the Commentaria exists from the period in which Beatus lived, and the oldest known version of the text dates to the late ninth century CE.30 The influence of the writings of Beatus helped elevate the status enjoyed by the Book of Revelation, and one biblical scholar noted that an important effect of the Commentaria was “to claim for the Apocalypse the same authority enjoyed by the gospels.”31 It is important to note, though, that the Commentaria gradually changed over time through the process of hand-copying, and it is in the illustrations accompanying the text that some of the most significant changes occurred.

The Commentaria, completed by Beatus in approximately 776 CE,32 is unusual in that also contains a world map with an interior ocean dividing a fourth continent from the

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three land masses typically representing the known world in the T-O maps of medieval Europe. The maps in some versions of the *Commentaria* retain the Noachid scheme typical of medieval maps, with different regions of the Earth representing the sons of Noah. This fourth land mass segmented the T-O diagram, forming a shape that resembles a sort of Y-O configuration, as depicted in the scanned image of the world map in the *Commentaria*:

![Figure 1.1 - The Y-O map of Beatus, from St. Gall Stiftsbibliothek](image)

Beatus, however, has not earned a reputation as a particularly innovative geographer or as a historian, and his work is best described in an assessment by Williams:

“his *Commentary* was a purposeful patchwork of passages from Patristic literature, up to

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33 Ibid. Williams argued that the fourth land mass “represents not an antoeccumenical hemisphere but the southernmost zone of the inhabited world.”


35 This fourth land mass depicted in the Y-O Beatus map is suggestive of a fourth continent to balance out Europe, Asia, and Africa.

and including works by Isidore of Seville.”

Still, the work of Beatus serves as a useful encapsulation of the early medieval European geography, despite his reputation as a “cut and paste editor,” and there are a number of thematic continuities in the Commentaria and the accompanying maps that are much in keeping with late medieval geography as well as beliefs about the regions in and near the kingdom of Prester John. More importantly, a number of elements in the maps, illustrations, and text of the Commentaria can also be found in late medieval and early modern literature regarding the kingdom of Prester John.

In one edition of the Commentaria, the so-called Girona Beatus of 975 CE, there are depictions of an Islamic warrior riding a horse, and these illustrations occur at pivotal points in the Commentaria. In one of the images the Islamic adversary takes the form of Herod persecuting the Christ child, and in another the horseman attacks a steadfast Christian, who steadfastly stands his ground in the knowledge that he will be saved from harm by his faith. These close associations between the apocalyptic prophecies of the book of Revelation and the Christian view of Muslims as agents of the Antichrist continue into the modern era, and this idea was reinforced in the legend of Prester John, who was viewed as a possible ally against the Islamic world.

Among the influences of the Beatus manuscripts on later medieval thought (and also the evolution of the Prester John legend) are the typical inclusion in the various

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37 Ibid., 15. Williams noted that the fifth century Commentary of Tyconius was especially influential in the work of Beatus. For more on this controversy, see John Williams, “Isidore, Orosius and the Beatus Map,” Imago Mundi 49 (1997), 7-32. Williams also provided readers with useful “family tree” diagram of the history of the permutations of the Commentaries.

38 Emmerson and McGinn, 219.

versions of the text of fantastic and monstrous beings in the illustrations. A mid-thirteenth century version of the Commentaria includes a fish-tailed archer and his dog in the process of attacking an armed centaur. The Gorleson Psalter (circa 1250 CE) depicts a satyr acting as a cowherd while playing a horn. The thirteenth century version of the Commentaries known as the Liege Psalter features a monstrous archer possessing the torso of a human male and lower body of a dragon. A fourteenth century Commentaries, which is known as the Breviaire de Marguerite de Bar, features a dispute between “a fish-tailed clerk and a man armed with shield and spear.” An eleventh century version of the Commentaries, also known as the Silos Apocalypse, depicts a seven-headed dragon attacking the Christian faithful during the end times, and beast attempts to flood the Earth by spewing waves of water from its mouth. Numerous other versions of the Commentaries contain maps and illustrations depicting the barbarian hordes known as Gog and Magog as well as the brass gates supposedly used by Alexander the Great to wall off these people from the Christian world.

Beatus thus influenced medieval geography as well as medieval traditions of apocalyptic literature, and certainly there is continuity between the work of Beatus and later medieval works containing fantastic themes, such as the eleventh century CE

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40 New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms 756, fol. IIr; Fig. 1, as cited in Howard Helsinger, “Images on the Beatus Page of Some Medieval Psalters,” The Art Bulletin 53:2 (Jun., 1971), 161.

41 London, British Museum Add. MS 49622, fol. 8r), as cited in Helsinger, 164.

42 New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M I55, fol. Ir, as cited in Helsinger, 164.

43 Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Lat. 84, fol. Igr, as cited in Helsinger, 164.

44 British Library Add. MS 11695, ff.147v-148.

45 Friedman, Monstrous Races, 45. The themes of Gog and Magog will be explored later in this dissertation chapter.
Marvels of the East.\textsuperscript{46} By extension, the realm of the legendary character of Prester John depicted by writers of the fraudulent letters shared numerous features with the fantastic world that could be found in copies of the Commentaries. Yet Beatus and the later copyists who transcribed the monk’s work did not operate in a literary vacuum, and they drew upon millennialist and apocalyptic traditions that spanned thousands of years.

\textit{Apocalyptic Biblical Traditions}

The literary works of the post-Roman, early medieval Mediterranean world often exhibited apocalyptic and millennialist tendencies. This is not surprising, given the political chaos of the region, and considerations such as the emergence of deadly microbes and eastern military threats merely added to the collective uncertainty of peoples living in the imperial remnants of the Romans. It is within this milieu of multi-dimensional turmoil that documents began to appear in numerous places around the region that purported to predict the events leading up to the end times of the Judeo-Christian beliefs. Such documents, moreover, were an important component of the literary and philosophical bases upon which later rested the legend of Prester John.

Various Old Testament texts contain references to the end of the physical world. One of those most frequently referenced by millennialist Christians is the book of Daniel, which was part of the Jewish Septuagint.\textsuperscript{47} Chapter seven contains Daniel’s apocalyptic dream of the end times, in which the earth is beset by “great beasts, which are four, are four kings, which shall arise out of the earth.”\textsuperscript{48} The fourth of these kings, described by


\textsuperscript{47} Daniel is not, however, a part of the Jewish Tanakh, or the canonical books of the Hebrew Bible. 2\textsuperscript{nd} century BCE Jewish scribes began to distance themselves from the Septuagint.

\textsuperscript{48} Daniel 7:17.
the author of the text as “diverse from all the others, exceeding dreadful, whose teeth were of iron, and his nails of brass,” has been traditionally associated by Christians as the antichrist figure of Revelation. However, this malevolent ruler, according to this passage, will eventually face the righteous wrath of the heavenly saints: “But the judgment shall sit, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and to destroy it unto the end.”

The Book of Zechariah also contains numerous references to the end times. The author wrote of the arrival of four chariots that would signify the beginning of the era of Jehovah’s final reign. The following passage from Zechariah describes the apocalyptic scene that would occur after the arrival of the four chariots:

In the first chariot were red horses; and in the second chariot black horses; And in the third chariot white horses; and in the fourth chariot grisled and bay horses. Then I answered and said unto the angel that talked with me, What are these, my lord? And the angel answered and said unto me, These are the four spirits of the heavens, which go forth from standing before the Lord of all the earth.

This era of the chariots was also supposed to mark the ascension of a mighty priest-king named Joshua, who Daniel described as the son of the high priest Josedech. This biblical personage bears a striking similarity to the Eastern potentate later known to Europeans as Prester John. In the following passage, there are a number of characteristics ascribed to

49 Daniel 7:19.

50 Note, however, that the term “antichrist” is not found in Revelation, but exclusively in 1 John and 2 John.


52 Some scholars suggest that the Book of Zechariah represents the work of multiple authors. For a detailed discussion of the authorship of this Old Testament text, see Robinson, George Livingstone, “The Prophecies of Zechariah with Special Reference to the Origin and Date of Chapters 9-14,” The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures 12: 1/2 (Oct., 1895 - Jan., 1896), 1-92.

53 Zechariah 6:2-5.
the biblical figure of Joshua that would later become hallmarks of the legendary priest-king:

Then take silver and gold, and make crowns, and set them upon the head of Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest; And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The Branch; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord: Even he shall build the temple of the Lord; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.  

Numerous references to the end times appear in the New Testament, but no book contains more millenialist imagery than the Book of Revelation. The book prophesizes the tribulation suffered by humans during the reign of Satan on the planet, and tells of war, famine, and plagues that will arrive in the end times. However, the final defeat of “Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth,” according to the vision received by John, would eventually bring about the Second Coming and the thousand-year reign of Christ. The following excerpt from John’s apocalyptic vision details the unfolding of this prophecy:

And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.  

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55 Revelation 17:5.  
56 Revelation 19:11-16.
Christians in the Mediterranean world of the post-Roman era lived in a time of social, political, and economic turmoil that could be interpreted as exhibiting many of the signs foretold in the apocalyptic writings of the Bible. The final death knell for the Western Roman Empire sounded in the form of epidemic disease, in particular the plague that struck during Justinian’s military attempt at reconquering the Italian peninsula. The death toll was horrific, and may have exceeded one-third of the population of the Mediterranean world. The Roman historian Procopius recorded the tremendous devastation wrought by the epidemic as it tore through Byzantium, and in the following passage he noted the horrendous death toll:

Now the disease in Byzantium ran a course of four months, and its greatest virulence lasted about three. And at first the deaths were a little more than the normal, then the mortality rose still higher, and afterwards the tale of dead reached five thousand each day, and again it even came to ten thousand and still more than that.

Epidemic disease was not the only evidence available for early medieval Christians that spelled the end of earthly time. The rise of Islam as a competing religious tradition, as well as the concurrent military conquests of Islamic Arabs, were viewed by some Christian writers as substantiation for the belief that the period of tribulation described in Revelation had begun. One of the earliest apocalyptic Christian texts of the post-Roman world was that purportedly penned by a bishop named Methodius of Patara. Methodius, who died as a martyr in 311 CE, was not the actual composer of the work.

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57 This epidemic was likely an earlier form of *Yrsina pestis* (bubonic plague). See William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 101-106.


Paul J. Alexander dated the text to sometime between 644 and 656 CE, and argued for the location of “Pseudo-Methodius” to be Syrian in nature. The Pseudo-Methodius text contains imagery highly reminiscent of Daniel and Revelation, but adds a few historical details. In particular, the document integrated into its prose the legend of the Macedonian conqueror Alexander.

The author of the Pseudo-Methodius text envisioned Alexander as a pious, God-fearing warrior who “went down to the East and killed Darius the Mede and conquered many places,” although the anachronistic quasi-Christianity of Alexander is ignored by the writer. The text described the forces of Islam in particularly degrading terms, although they are usually referred to with Biblical terms such as “sons of Ismael.” Alexander, in this version of his legend, built a tremendous “gate of brass” to seal off Christendom from the onslaught of barbaric peoples. Possibly in response to the significant advances of the forces of Islam, the author believed that he was living in an age when these gates could no longer hold back the bottled up energy of the dreaded barbarians. This is similar to and contemporaneous with Iberian associations in the ninth

61 Ibid., 29ff.
62 Alexander, 40. The text has complete translations of many other apocalyptic accounts and is highly recommended for scholars interested in this line of inquiry.
63 Alexander, 44.
64 Ibid., 41.
65 Other theories suggest a linkage in the minds of late medieval Europeans bewteen the “followers of Gog and Magog” and the Mongols and Turkish tribes of Central and Eastern Asia. See Jones, W.R., “The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 13:4 (Oct., 1971), 399-400. Jones argued that “identification of Gog and Magog with the Tartars and Turks was popularized in Europe through the circulation of such ancient sources as the Revelations of the Pseudo-Methodius, a Latin work of the seventh century, and the Cosmography of Aethicus Ister.”
and tenth centuries CE between the prophet Muhammad and the Antichrist; the rumor-
mongerers claimed that Muhammad was born in 666 CE, which equated to the mark of
the Beast. In the following passage, the author of the Pseudo-Methodius text described
his vision of a world in which these heathen hordes were no longer walled off from the
world of the Christians:

But at the end of the ages, as was the saying of the prophet Ezekiel which was
prophesied concerning them, saying: In the end of times, at the end of the world,
the followers of Agog and Magog will come out on the land of Israel. These are
the people whom Alexander imprisoned inside the gates of the North: Ogug and
Magog and Joel and Agag and Ashkenazu and Dipar and Pujoio and Lydians and
Huns and Persians and Daqlaie and Tebelie and Darmetaie and Kaukebaie and
Emrataie and Garmidmaie and Men-Eaters who are called Cynocephali and
Thracians and Alani and Pišīlie and Dsheie and Salṭraie.

The author of the Pseudo-Methodius text explained that the rise of Islam was not
a sign that God loved “these sons of Ismael,” but rather that they entered “the kingdom of
the Christians…because of the iniquity and the sin perpetrated by the Christians.”

Among these transgressions were the behaviors of prostitution, homosexuality, and
bestiality, and the author of the Pseudo-Methodius text left little to the imagination of
readers as to the depravities by Christians that contributed to the successes of Islamic
warriors in conquering territories:

66 Emmerson and McGinn, 229.

67 Alexander, 41. The etymological source of the gated peoples named by Pseudo-Methodius is
fascinating in itself. Magog and Agog (also simply “Gog”) have Biblical roots, as do Joel and Agag. The
Ashkenazu may be related to the Ashkenazi, Jewish peoples from the Rhine region; it could also be a
reference to a Germanic tribe, since “ashkenaz” is a traditional Hebrew word for Germany. The Lydian
kingdom occupied much of Asia Minor in the first half of the first millennium BCE. Thracians, Huns, and
Persians, of course, are well-known to classical and medieval scholars. “Tebelie” is curious; there exists a
Bantu-speaking people in south-central Africa, the Matebele, from whom this term may reference; it may
also be of Semitic origin. “Kaukebaie” may refer to regions in either the Bekaa valley or the Gaza, both of
which contain towns named Kaukaba. “Emrataie” may be a derivation of emir, a traditional Arabic title of
nobility. Cynocephali are a recurrent feature of medieval European literature, and they were believed to be
people with heads like dogs or jackals.

68 Ibid., 44.
Female harlots were standing in the streets, and a man entered and went a-whoring, and he went out and his son came, and with the same woman he polluted himself...their males abandoned the use of the nature of women and indulged in lust with one another and males behaved unseemly with other males...also women...partly held intercourse contrary to nature. Because of this God will deliver them to the defilement of the barbarians.\(^{69}\)

Much like the period of trials and tribulation predicted in the Book of Revelation, which would occur under the reign of the so-called Ismaelites, this era of suffering would be difficult to endure for the remaining faithful Christians. The author of the Pseudo-Methodius text predicted that Muslims would “slaughter those who minister in the sanctuary,” and that they would “tear infants from the sides of their mothers and like unclean animals they will dash them against the rocks.”\(^{70}\)

It was within this milieu of apocalyptic traditions that the legendary Prester John made his first appearances in Europe. The mythical priest-king no doubt would have been seen as a powerful bastion of Christianity against the Islamic world, perhaps being strong enough to help defeat the forces arrayed in the military service for Allah. The late medieval and early modern desire for contact with Prester John should be viewed within such a context, though there were additional European literary traditions that the legendary kingdom of Prester John also mirrored.

*Alexander Romance Traditions, Terrestrial Paradise, and the Kingdom of Prester John*

The fraudulent letters purportedly penned by the mythical have most frequently been studied by scholars with an eye toward determining the possible sources of the forgeries. Yet equally important are the European literary traditions with which the legend of Prester John shared many traits. While individual composers of the letters

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\(^{69}\) Ibid.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 46.
attributed to Prester John may have each possessed a variety of political and religious motives for their creative missives, each writer used motifs and themes that would be instantly recognized by their readers.

One of the commonalities between the rhetoric used to describe the legendary kingdom of Prester John and existing literary genres in medieval Europe are the so-called Alexander romances, which were medieval legends revolving around the fabled deeds of Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great. The earliest Greek versions of the Alexandrine legend date to the third century CE, while fourth century Latin text served as the basis for translating the legend into dozens of European and western Asian languages.\(^71\)

The versions of the Alexander romance very widely in content, and there are at least three main archetypes. The first of these is a relatively historical approach that relies in large measure on Greek writers for source material. Another version of the Alexander romance is predicated upon a series of letters supposedly penned by Alexander to his mother Olympius and also to his aged tutor Aristotle. The third variant of the Alexander romance begins with the second archetype and adds a great deal of fantastic wonders of the East, and typically places Alexander within a Judeo-Christian literary and religious tradition.\(^72\)

The Prester John legend and that ascribed to the life of Alexander the Great, in fact, share numerous similarities. Meir Bar-Ilan found a number of specific examples of such similarities in Hebrew translations of both the *Letter of Prester John* and the

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\(^72\) Ibid., 9.
Both legends feature the use of elephants as fighting beasts by the armies profiled. In addition, the typical versions of both legends describe the presence of unusual humanoid creatures, such as Amazons and men without heads, while both legends typically include references to cannibalistic peoples in the distant lands being described. Similar to the traditions associated with the legendary peoples known as Gog and Magog, the legends surrounding Prester John and Alexander the Great feature barbaric hordes walled off by mountains. Finally, in both legends there are references to a terrestrial Paradise, as both legends typically refer to rivers that flow from Paradise as well as some form of a fountain of life. Bar-Ilan’s methodical work lends credibility to the argument that the Prester John legend possesses literary as well as historical roots, highlighting the similarities between these medieval genres.

Another medieval literary genre that can frequently be found in close association with the legend of Prester John is the notion of a terrestrial Paradise. As discussed in earlier in this chapter, the western Christian preoccupation with locating this earthly Paradise has classical as well as biblical roots. T-O and other forms of medieval cartography typically included a terrestrial paradise in the East, and the term for the process of “orientating” a map reflects this medieval belief in an Asian location for

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73 Bar-Ilan, Meir, 296.

74 Ibid.

75 The book of Genesis (2:10-14) provides the Judeo-Christian traditions with geographical details on the location of the terrestrial Paradise: “A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.”
paradise on Earth. \textsuperscript{76} Many medieval accounts of the earthly Paradise also included references to monstrous creatures and half-human races, suggesting that any attempt to travel to Paradise meant passing through distant territories inhabited by these bizarre beings. \textsuperscript{77} Such themes were regular features of the letters and legends associated with the kingdom of Prester John.

The kingdom of Prester John was often depicted in close proximity to a terrestrial Paradise. In the letter purportedly composed by Prester John to Byzantine emperor Komemnus, the author noted that “the Indus, which, issuing from Paradise, extends its windings by various channels through all the province; and in it are found the emeralds, sapphires, carbuncles,\textsuperscript{78} topazes, chrysolites,\textsuperscript{79} onyxes, beryls, sardonyxes,\textsuperscript{80} and many other precious stones.”\textsuperscript{81} A similar claim was made by the author of the letter from Prester John to the king of France and the Holy Roman emperor, as the writer indicated that between the kingdom of Prester John “and the Saracens there flows a river called Ydonis which comes from the terrestrial paradise and is full of precious stones.”\textsuperscript{82} A traveler visiting the land of Prester John thus might have had an opportunity to approach or even reach the terrestrial Paradise, and the authors of the letters attributed to Prester


\textsuperscript{77} John Block Friedman, \textit{The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought} (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 163.

\textsuperscript{78} A red cabachon cut gemstone, especially the red garnet.

\textsuperscript{79} A pale green mineral better known as olivine to modern readers.

\textsuperscript{80} A form of banded agate stone often cut and polished as a decorative gem.

\textsuperscript{81} See Appendix A of this dissertation for a complete transcription of the letter.

\textsuperscript{82} See Appendix B of this dissertation for a complete transcription of the letter from Prester John to his counterparts in France and the HRE.
John were not unaware of the magical and spiritual power that the Garden of Eden must have held for medieval readers.

An earthly Paradise was but one of many geographical, literary, and apocalyptic traditions with which the authors of the fraudulent *Letters of Prester John* were acquainted. While speculation on the motives and identities of such letter writers is an interesting diversion, it is more important to recognize that the authors of these missives did not operate from within intellectual vacuums. The letters were composed using readily identifiable literary and geographical elements, and what might seem fantastic to modern readers made perfect sense to late medieval and early modern Europeans. The next chapter of this dissertation examines the real-world events and personalities that elevated the idea of a distant Christian priest-king from an entertaining fantasy to a source of geopolitical yearning.
Chapter Three

The Formal Arrival of Prester John into European Thought

The appearance in the eleventh century of the Seljuk Turks into Near Eastern geopolitics provided the historical background against which the legend of Prester John came into being. Descended from a tribal chief named Seljuk, whose homeland lay beyond the Oxus River near the Aral Sea, the Seljuks not only developed a highly-effective fighting force but also, through their close contacts with Persian court life in Khorasan and Transoxania (modern day Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan), attracted a body of able bureaucrats. Extending from Central Asia to the Byzantine marshes in Asia Minor, the Seljuk state under its first three sultans established a highly cohesive, well-administered Sunni state under the nominal authority of the 'Abbasid caliphs at Baghdad.¹

Most importantly, however, the Seljuks loomed over the metaphorical and literal horizons as a not-too-distant threat to the Byzantine Empire. In August, 1071, Seljuk forces destroyed a Byzantine army led by Emperor Romanus IV Diogenes. The Emperor himself in fact was captured and “led away, a prisoner, to the enemy camp, and his army was scattered.”² Although separated from spiritual union with Rome since the schism associated with Michael Cærularius, the emperor of Constantinople pleaded for the

assistance of the Roman pope. In 1073 Byzantine Emperor Michael VII and Pope
Gregory VII exchanged correspondence on the subject of Western military assistance.³

The fall of Jerusalem – long a symbol of great importance to Christians - to Seljuk
Turk forces in 1077 marked the beginning of a period of intense focus by European
leaders on the Near East. More so than any other city, Jerusalem occupied a special place
in the hearts of Christians of all persuasions. The city had been the destination of
pilgrims since the days of the Roman Empire. There was also a thriving pilgrimage
industry catering to these European Christians desirous of visiting the Holy Land.⁴ Pope
Urban II, in his plea at the Council of Clermont (1095), summed up the crucial
significance of the role of the city of Jerusalem as a geographical and spiritual icon for
adherents of the Christian faith:

Jerusalem is the navel of the world; the land is fruitful above others, like another
paradise of delights. This the Redeemer of the human race has made illustrious
by His advent, has beautified by residence, has consecrated by suffering, has
redeemed by death, has glorified by burial.⁵

Pope Urban II portrayed a scene of heathen defilement that purportedly roused the
anger of every God-fearing archbishop, priest, prince, and knight in attendance at the
speech. One of the purposes of such a vitriolic tirade certainly must have been to create a
sense of urgency among the listeners. The Bishop of Rome alerted the faithful of the
scourge that resided in the nearby East, a threat to Christianity that could only be quelled
through the efforts of warriors for the faith:

³ Ibid., 180.

⁴ For an excellent overview of medieval pilgrims and the industry related to travel to the Holy
Land, see Allen, Rosamund (ed.), Eastward Bound: Travel and Travellers, 1050-1550 (Manchester, UK:

⁵ Pope Urban II. Speech at the Council of Clermont, in Hollister, 184.
[A] horrible tale has gone forth and very frequently has been brought to our ears, namely that a race from the kingdom of the Persians, an accursed race, a race utterly alienated from God…has invaded the lands of those Christians [the Levant Christian states] and has depopulated them by the sword, pillage and fire…it has either entirely destroyed the churches of God or has appropriated them for the rites of its own religion. They destroy the altars, after having defiled them with their uncleanness. They circumcise the Christians, and the blood of the circumcision they either spread upon the altars or pour into the vases of the baptismal font.⁶

This emotional appeal – though one might argue that Urban’s crusade could have been simply a clever smokescreen for the consolidation of papal authority⁷ - led to the rapid assemblage of forces seeking to mete out justice against the Muslim hordes.

Moreover - whether out of piety, a sense of adventure, or the lure of the spoils of war - a motley collection of individuals began to coalesce with the nebulous goal of traveling to the Holy Land and engaging the forces of Islam.

The capture of Jerusalem by Muslim armies thus set into motion the numerous Christian Crusades against the Islamic world in the Near East. Beginning with the recapture of Nicaea in 1097, the leaders of the First Crusade began to establish Christian principalities in the Holy Land. Jerusalem and Edessa, both recaptured in 1099, became important bases for the eventual establishment of Latin Christian states in the region. These cities provided a heightened sense of political legitimacy to post-Crusade claims by Christians to territories in the Levant.

The Crusaders, however, were fortunate enough to have benefited from a period of extreme factionalism in the Islamic world. The Seljuk dynasty, which had recently unified much of the Muslim world in the Levant, became torn apart by secessionist

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⁶ Ibid. 183.

infighting and dynastic struggles. The improbable gains accorded to the crusading Europeans in the Holy Land were as much a function of a divided enemy as they were of any supposed strategic acumen by European leaders, though accounts from the Crusaders typically credited the victories to the hand of God.

However, the sudden fall of Edessa in 1144 to forces led by Turkish general Imad ad-din Zengi sent metaphorical shock waves that reverberated throughout the Christian world. For the first time Muslim forces successfully laid siege to and ousted Crusader forces from a major city that the Westerners occupied in the Levant. The unsettling prospect of Zengi undoing all that had been accomplished in the Holy Land since 1097 would likely have frightened Christian leaders. The panicked Crusaders dispatched envoys to a variety of European rulers, and they pleaded for the dispatch of military reinforcements to bolster the Latin states of the Near East in their battles against the armies of Islam.8

It was at this point in time that substantive evidence emerges of the existence of the Prester John legend. A prelate arrived at the Papal court in 1122 who claimed to be a representative of the Christian Church in India. Rachewitz noted that the supposed priest "caused a sensation throughout Italy with his description of the miracles that occurred every year in India on the feast of St. Thomas."9 Helleiner observed that "his Roman interlocutors understood him to say that his name was Johannes, and that he was the prelate in charge of the shrine of St. Thomas."10 Both historians linked this visitor with

10 Helleiner, 51.
the association between a distant and hitherto forgotten Christian kingdom and its location somewhere in the Indies.

The first well-documented literary appearance of the legendary priest-king occurred in 1145,\(^\text{11}\) and it was recorded by a German bishop named Otto of Freising. Interestingly, Otto’s reputation as a historian is particularly lauded. C.H. Haskins argued that in Otto of Freising “the German historiography of the Middle Ages reaches its highest point.”\(^\text{12}\) Charles Mierow maintained that Otto’s “objectivity is evident throughout his historical work.”\(^\text{13}\) While a few historians have pointed out some inconsistencies in the writings of Otto, Karl F. Morrison argued that the “the inconsistencies tell us not only about the external circumstances in which the bishop wrote, but also about a cognitive strategy that persisted throughout the fifteen years of his literary work.”\(^\text{14}\) The writings of such a respected figure carried significant weight, and it should be no surprise that the linking of the Prester John legend to Otto of Freising helped legitimize this mythical figure.

In his *Chronicle* Otto described the arrival of a certain Bishop Hugh of Jabala. This prelate supposedly was dispatched by the Christian prince Raymond of Antioch to supplicate Pope Eugene III for aid to the beleaguered Christian princes of Jerusalem.\(^\text{15}\) Otto recounted the description given to the Pope of a certain Asian potentate who reigned


\(^{13}\) Mierow, 396.


\(^{15}\) Ibid., 6.
somewhere to the east of the Muslims. In the following passage, the author regaled some of the triumphs of his royal protagonist:

He [Bishop Hugh] said, indeed, that not many years since, one John, a king and priest living in the Far East, beyond Persia and Armenia, and who, with his people, is a Christian, but a Nestorian, had warred upon the so-called Samiards, the brother kings of the Medes and Persians.16

Hugh purportedly related to Otto that the lines of battle were drawn between the two forces after Prester John attacked a capital city known as Ebactanus.17 The fight against the Muslim forces of Persia ended in victory after a bloody three-day mêlée, a conflict with serious loss of life. Otto’s account described the outcome of the epic battle involving the fearless priest-king:

Both sides were willing to die rather than to flee. At length, Prester John, as he is usually called, put the Persians to flight and emerged from the dreadful slaughter as victor.18

However, lest the Western Christians become complacent in their belief in the capacity of Prester John to wage war on the Saracens from the East, Otto recorded Bishop Hugh’s description of the priest-king’s inability to come to the aid of the Crusaders. In the following passage, certain environmental factors prevented Prester John from flexing his proverbial muscles:

The Bishop said that the aforesaid John moved his army to aid the church of Jerusalem, but that when he came to the Tigris and was unable to take his army across it by any means, he turned aside to the north, where he had been informed

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17 Likely Ecbatana, which is the modern day Iranian city of Hamedan, a city that served as a capital for both the Medes and Parthians. One source suggests that the city also served as a capital for the Assyrians; see I.N. Medvedskaya, “Were the Assyrians at Ecbatana?” *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 16:1-2 (Jan, 2002), 45-57.

18 Otto of Friesing, 334.
that the stream was frozen solid during the winter. There he awaited the ice for several years, but saw none because of the temperate weather. His army lost many men on account of the weather to which they were unaccustomed and he was compelled to return home.  

Thus, if Prester John was an invention of Byzantine Christians, he was designed as a sort of device of negative persuasion; that is, because help for the Crusaders would not arrive from the East, it was incumbent upon Western Christians to defend the Holy Land.

Otto’s use of the phrase “as he is usually called” after identifying the person of Prester John has been suggested by some historians to indicate that the legend may predate Otto’s *Chronicles*. Indeed, a possible earlier historical antecedent of the priest-king might be interpreted from the visit of the aforementioned “John, the Patriarch of the Indians” who visited Rome in 1122. Another contemporary chronicler (Odo of Reims) described this person as the Archbishop of India. At any rate, both sources agreed on the exotic nature of the papal visitor. The supposed high priest recounted how, on the Feast of St. Thomas, the uncorrupted body of the saint would suddenly become animated and, with its arm, the corpse would distribute communion to the faithful. However, neither source specifically referred to the guest with any of the monikers that have come to be associated with Prester John, and their role in the legend’s evolution were most likely of a contributory nature.

*The Letters of Prester John*

The legend of Prester John received its most significant boost in 1165 with the appearance of letters addressed to Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenus and

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19 Ibid.
Frederick I, Holy Roman Emperor. There are over 100 extant copies of the letters archived in libraries around Europe. In addition to Greek and Latin, there are extant copies of the *Letter of Prester John* in German, French, Italian, Hebrew, Anglo-Norman, and the late medieval Scottish dialect, along with other divergent versions in contemporary Gaelic. The letter addressed to Frederick I contained statements that purported to illustrate the fabulous wealth of the priest-king, and the author created a regal character whose fantastic affluence far exceeded that of any of his European contemporaries:

> And in truth may you know that our crown is the greatest in the world, for it is richer than silver and gold and precious stones and pearls. And we have in our country fortified and elevated cities, surrounded by walls, as well as various and strong towns. And may you know clearly that there are 42 kings under our government and crown and they are Christians...We possess horses which carry a rider for three days without food or drink, and there is no king either east or west as rich as we are; and we possess large and strong towns, and before us go 30,000 priests and horsemen, and when we go out to war there march with us 100,000 horsemen--quite apart from other riders who go upon elephants which carry litters and food as well as all the army on foot, except only those who remain at our Court and in our houses.

The author of the letter described Prester John as being a potentate whose power and prestige far surpassed any of the monarchs on the thrones of the kingdoms of Europe. The original author’s identity and ultimate aims, of course, remain shrouded in mystery, and have produced speculation by historians for over eight hundred years. Helleiner argued that the original author of the first Prester John letter was either “a man who served the political interests of the Norman princes of Sicily, or by a German...who

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21 Bar-Ilan, 291.


resented the monopolistic claims of the Greeks to the Imperial dignity.” For the purposes of this study, the identification of the author(s) are less important than the effect that these letters had upon European mentalité in the centuries that followed their arrival in the courts of Europe in 1165.

The possible existence of a powerful Christian kingdom in the East fueled the imagination of Western Christians. If the two bifurcations of the True Faith could be united, the resulting synergy would be a holy force that no assemblage of infidels could resist. The letter of Prester John to Frederick I emphasized these aspirations in the following passage:

And may you know that we have vowed to go and to conquer the land of Israel and Jerusalem; and we shall go there with great glory and a strong army and we shall slay those who hate our faith.  

Another apocryphal document appeared in Western Europe in 1221, a text that has become known as the Report on King David. In various versions of the Report, this Christian King David of India was either the son or grandson of Prester John. Rachewiltz noted that the Report “was received with great jubilation at Damietta, as it added strength to the prophecies and confirmed those rumours about the imminent arrival of Prester John that had been circulating for some time.”  

This mythical King David might be based upon the historical personage of the Naiman king Küchlug, who


25 Ibid., 77.

26 Rachewiltz, _Papal Envoys to the Great Khans_, 39.

27 Ibid.
conquered the Central Asian Kara Khitai and may have once been a Nestorian Christian.\(^{28}\)

One of the more specific early accounts provided about the location of the Kingdom of Prester John was provided by Gregory Albufaraj, the son of a Jewish physician in the eastern Anatolia city of Malatiya. Born in 1226, Albufaraj – who later used the name Bar Hebraeus – fled from advancing Mongol armies in 1244. He later became Bishop of Guba, Bishop of Aleppo, and finally Primate of the Jacobites\(^{29}\) before his death in 1286. Albufaraj claimed that the powerful Mongol tribe of the Keraits underwent a mass baptism in 1007, a ceremony that saw 200,000 Mongols convert to Nestorian Christianity.\(^{30}\)

The location of the empire of the great king Prester John thus became of paramount importance to European leaders. Of course, given the general level of geographic ignorance in late medieval Europe, it is not surprising that the mythical potentate’s empire was variously placed in lands ranging from Abyssinia (Ethiopia) to the Malabar Coast of India to western China. Part of the variance in locale can be attributed to the term “India” itself. Far from the modern understanding of a particular Asian subcontinent, “India” was understood by late medieval Europeans to simply refer to any lands that lay to the south and/or east of the Byzantine Empire.\(^{31}\)


An ill-defined region of Central Asia became the most frequent placement of the kingdom of Prester John in late medieval Europe, in large part due to the following reference in Prester John’s Letter:

And may you know that in our land there is a country called the great India, towards the east, and there is also the devastated Babel near the tower which men built. And another India which is situated by the river Sambation…[Prester John was] waited on by 7 kings at a time, by 60 dukes and 365 counts; 12 archbishops sat on his right hand, and 20 bishops on his left, besides the patriarch of St Thomas, the protopope of the Sarmagantians [emphasis added].

The similarities between the “Sarmagantians” and Samarkand could not have been missed by knowledgeable Europeans, as the city of Samarkand was a storied way-station on the silk route to China. Samarkand, the center of Transoxania, was also well known to Europeans through the exploits of Alexander the Great, whose legendary feats were the substance of many European epic romances, as profiled in the second chapter of this dissertation.

While strictly a mythical figure, the personage of Prester John had real, discernible effects on late medieval Europeans. Pope Alexander III was also intrigued by the legendary character; he composed a letter in 1177 that urged Prester John to embrace the true (Roman) faith. In addition, the Pope gently chided the mighty potentate on his seemingly boastful manner. The pope’s personal physician, a man named Phillip, began the journey to the lands of Prester John; historians, however, have not been provided with the results of Phillip’s expedition.33

The roots of the Prester John legend might also be traced to other Central Asian events; one such historical basis was the defeat of the Seljuk Turk sultan Sanjar in 1141.

32 Beckingham and Ullendorff, 92-96.
33 Nowell, 445.
The conquering forces were led by Chinese-born Khitan prince Yeh-lü Ta-shih, who, though exiled from his Mongolian home, built the huge Qara-Khitay Empire.\textsuperscript{34} Yeh-lü Ta-shih was most likely a Buddhist who also maintained loyalty to the shamanistic tribal religion of the Khitan.\textsuperscript{35} However, given the preponderance of Nestorian Christians throughout Central Asia, it is understandable that Yeh-lü Ta-shih might be assumed by Europeans to be a Christian. In addition, the prevailing belief throughout medieval and early modern Europe was that any enemy of Islam must, by definition, be a Christian.\textsuperscript{36}

The mythical King of the Three Indies played a prominent, though non-participatory, role in the evolution of the Fifth Crusade. Western forces in Palestine received news in 1217 that Prester John was going to join the Crusaders in the war against the Saracens. Two years later, Crusaders in Egypt heard that Prester John (or, alternately, his mythical son or perhaps grandson King David, referenced earlier) was said to be rampaging through the Persian flanks of the Muslim forces. Unfortunately for the Crusaders, such prognostications did not materialize; the armies of the mighty priest-king never arrived for either battle, and the Christians were routed at Damietta and Cairo.\textsuperscript{37} Yet for the legend of Prester John the Crusades might be seen in a different light, for despite the mythical priest-king’s failure to provide logistical support to his presumed Christian coreligionists, belief among Europeans in the power of the distant Christian monarch continued to grow during this period.

\textsuperscript{34} Rachewiltz, \textit{Prester John and Europe’s Discovery of East Asia}, 4.

\textsuperscript{35} Silverberg, 12.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 6.
Historical Figures Who May Have Influenced the Prester John Legend

Certainly the political and religious motives of the original writers of the letters that were purported to have been penned by Prester John should be examined to understand the reasons why the anonymous writers perpetrated their frauds.38 Understanding exactly why the letters may have been written can inform the study of late medieval geopolitics. Moreover, the earliest travel accounts that provided information about the kingdom of Prester John should also be scrutinized to comprehend the mentalité of Europeans traveling abroad in search of the elusive priest-king. After all, the fact that this mythical figure did not actually exist – and that there never existed a powerful kingdom with which Europeans could ally themselves – does not change the reality of strong European beliefs in the existence of Prester John.

However, the evolving legend of Prester John had its basis in far more than a handful of deceitful letters and fanciful travel accounts. The lives, actions, and realms of historical figures in Asia and Africa undoubtedly influenced the Prester John legend over its twisting course between the twelfth and the eighteenth centuries. The next section of this dissertation examines a number of prominent contemporary rulers from the late medieval era whose reputation may have influenced or altered the various versions of the legend of Prester John that circulated throughout Europe in the twelfth through eighteenth centuries.39

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38 There has been much speculation on the motives of the writers of the original letters of Prester John. One of the most cogent is the thesis developed by Bernard Hamilton, who argued that that the first letter was created for propaganda purposes for HRE Frederick Barbarossa. See “Prester John and the Three Kings of Cologne,” in Charles F. Beckingham and Bernard Hamilton (eds.), Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes (Aldershot, UK: Variorum, 1996), 171-185.

39 It should be noted that a number of historians dispute the idea that there could be a historical basis for the legendary Prester John. For a thorough overview of this debate, see especially Charles E. Nowell, “The Historical Prester John,” Speculum 28:3 (Jul., 1953), pp. 435-445. However, this section of
The westward expansion of the nomadic Mongols did not go unnoticed in Europe, and the history of Mongol drive across Asia need not be recounted here. However, two particular Mongol leaders, Genghis Khan and Hulagu Khan, stand out as figures that may have played roles in the evolution of the Prester John legend. Europeans retained memory of the Nestorian Christian churches in Asia, and there were a significant number of Nestorians who held important positions in the Mongol government. Moreover, Europeans knew from experience the powerful armies that surged westward across the steppe, and the conquest of Baghdad by Hulagu Khan likely cemented the idea that an eastern ally could open a deadly flank upon the Islamic world.

The African continent produced a number of wealthy medieval kingdoms whose prominence did not escape the attention of learned Europeans. Trans-Saharan commerce, while likely existing before the written record, began to peak during the ascent of the West African kingdom of Ghana. One of the principal trade goods shipped to North Africa, and ultimately into Europe, was gold, a trade that extended back to at least the sixth century CE. Perhaps as much as two-thirds of the gold circulating in Europe and North Africa in the fourteenth century had its origin in the trans-Saharan trade, and during the fourteenth century the port city of Genoa alone imported between 400 and 800

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kilograms of Sudanese gold per year. The Sahara acted as a geographic cloak for Europeans, and tales of vast wealth, strange creatures, and torrid zones fill the European maps and literature of the late medieval period. The emergence of Mali in post-Ghanaian West Africa owed much to the discovery of the Bure gold fields, and one of the primary beneficiaries of the metallic wealth was the Mali king Mansa Musa. Reigning from 1312 to 1337, word of the kingdom of Mansa Musa – widely considered by medieval African specialists as the “golden age of Mali” - likely reached Europe in some distilled form via interaction with North African traders.

As a devout Muslim, Musa certainly could not have been directly mistaken for the arch-Christian Prester John. The Malian king built beautiful mosques and established important centers of religious and intellectual study, most notably those in Timbuktu. However, tales of the vast wealth of Mansa Musa would have added to the mystique of sub-Saharan Africa, and would likely have helped Europeans reconsider the possibility that Prester John’s kingdom similarly tapped into the wealth of the African continent. In addition, the famous 1324-25 pilgrimage by Mansa Musa to Mecca was well documented by Arabic sources. It is highly likely that news of this wealthy African potentate’s travels seeped into the consciousness of Europeans, even though the specifics of his religious affiliation might not have meshed with European desires of linking up with a Christian ally in their struggle against the Islamic world. Undoubtedly the gold of West Africa -

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which filtered to Europe through the trans-Saharan trade networks - made a lasting impression on medieval Europeans.

Certainly Mansa Musa made enough of an impression on fourteenth century Europeans so as to become a prominent feature on a number of European maps. The legend on a contemporary map by Cresques offers a glimpse into the high esteem that Mansa Musa held among those Europeans aware of his kingdom, and the text reads as follows:

This negro lord is called Musa Mali, Lord of the Negroes of Guinea. So abundant is the gold which is found in his country that he is the richest and most noble King in all the land.\(^{46}\)

The Arabic historian Al-Umari visited Cairo several years after the caravans of Mansa Musa passed through the Egyptian city en route to Mecca. Perhaps out of religious zeal - or perhaps out of a combination of pious philanthropy and regal extravagance - Mansa Musa gave away tremendous amounts of gold to the masses who thronged his caravans as they made their way across the eastern Sahara, Al-Umari offered the following description of the epic largesse that Mansa Musa bestowed upon the simple people who thronged after his caravans:

This man [Mansa Musa] flooded Cairo with his benefactions. He left no court, emir, nor holder of a royal office without the gift of a load of gold. The Cairenes made incalculable profits out of him and his suite in buying and selling and giving and taking. They exchanged gold until they depressed its value in Egypt and caused its price to fall... Gold was at a high price in Egypt until they came in that year. The mithqal did not go below 25 \textit{dirhams} and was generally above, but from that time its value fell and it cheapened in price and has remained cheap till now. The mithqal does not exceed 22 \textit{dirhams} or less. This has been the state of

affairs for about twelve years until this day by reason of the large amount of gold which they brought into Egypt and spent there.\textsuperscript{47}

It is difficult to believe that the largesse of the Malian king remained entirely outside the collective awareness of fourteenth-century Europeans. In all likelihood, rumors of the enormous riches of sub-Saharan African kings helped shift the locus of the kingdom of Prester John from distant Asia to a region somewhat closer to Europe. It is perhaps not surprising that the ruler of a nation in the Ethiopian Highlands eventually became the focus of interest by Europeans seeking the fabled Prester John. Mansa Musa may not have been the Christian priest-king known as Prester John believed by Europeans to exist somewhere in the Indies, but his wealthy kingdom surely provided an enticing lure to the mysterious regions below the Sahara Desert.

Some scholars argue that learned Europeans always believed that the kingdom of Prester John was located in the Horn of Africa. Beckingham, for example, made a case for an Ethiopian basis for the legend based upon an analysis of the letter from Pope Alexander III to Prester John. Beckingham added that, given the Monophysite references and the fact that envoys from Prester John had apparently reached Rome (thus proving a relative proximity between Rome and the priest-king), there “could be little doubt of the nationality of the people whom Philip met or that the Pope’s letter was intended for the Emperor of Ethiopia.”\textsuperscript{48}

What is clear is that, by the end of the fourteenth century, there was a growing European belief that the location of the kingdom of Prester John centered on the region of


Nearer India, or Abyssinia. The historical roots of the Ethiopian locus for the priest-king can be traced to 1306, when thirty Ethiopian envoys stopped in Genoa after visiting Avignon and Rome.\textsuperscript{49} The stated purpose of their voyage was the establishment of an alliance between the emperor of Ethiopia and the rulers of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. The Ethiopian monarch had apparently heard of the Iberian struggles against the forces of Islam, and believed that some type of linkage might offer mutually beneficial possibilities. It is not known if this mission ever reached the Spanish sovereigns, but documented evidence exists that Pope Clement V received the envoys.\textsuperscript{50} In any case, the visit by distant Christian delegates certainly made an impression on those aware of the mission and intent.

The Genoa layover provided Giovanni da Carignano, Rector of the Church of St. Mark in Genoa, an opportunity to interview the exotic visitors who traveled from the distant region. Carignano was also noteworthy for his work in the field of geography; he compiled from their statements a treatise on Ethiopia. In his report, he made the following summation of the political and religious structure of the kingdom of Prester John:

Prester John is set over that people [Ethiopians] as patriarch; and he says that under him are 127 archbishoprics, each of which has 20 bishops. Those who are to be reborn they baptize in the Roman manner…it is said that their emperor is most Christian, to whom 74 kings and almost innumerable princes pay allegiance, except those kings who observe the laws of Mahomet but submit to the emperor in other things.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{49} Silverberg, 164-65.
\textsuperscript{50} Beckingham and Hamilton, 251.
\textsuperscript{51} Giovanni da Carignano, as quoted in Silverberg, 165.
Another contemporary European document that placed Prester John in Ethiopia was written by an unnamed Franciscan friar between 1330 and 1340. The work, entitled *The Book of the Knowledge of All the Kingdoms, Lands, and Lordships That Are in the World*, claimed that its author was a world traveler. The author wrote in the first person, and some of the geographic details are amazingly precise for its day, although the text is bogged down by fanciful “observations” of such phenomena as monsters and a race of deaf men. The author unambiguously located Prester John in Africa, and the following is his description of the lands of the priest-king:

I came to a great city called Graconia which is the head of the empire of Abdeselib, a word meaning ‘Servant of the Cross.’ The Abdeselib is a defender of the church of Nubia and Ethiopia, and he defends Preste Juan who is patriarch of Nubia and Abyssinia, and rules over very great lands and many cities of Christians.  

The pattern of presenting Prester John in an Abyssinian setting continued in the journeys of Nicoló de’ Conti, a merchant from a family of Venetian nobles. Beginning in 1416 in the city of Damascus, he visited such locations as Baghdad, Mylapur, Sumatra, Java, and the coast of Ethiopia. Near the end of his travels, he struck up a friendship with a Spaniard named Pero Tafur, who recounted Conti’s travels several years later in a book entitled *Travels and Adventures*.  

According to Tafur, Conti relayed the following information about the Ethiopian priest-king:

[Prester John] had twenty-five kings in his service, although they were not great rulers… [there was] a sea coast where the crabs, on reaching land, turn to stone…and a place where certain men, in order to leave behind a reputation for

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52 Silverberg, 168.

strength...make an apparatus like shears, and putting their heads between the blades they force them to shut with their feet, and so cut off their heads.\textsuperscript{54}

Concurrent with European literary descriptions of an African location for the kingdom of Prester John was the rise of one of Ethiopia’s greatest kings, Zar’a Yakob, who ruled that land from 1434 to 1468. Given that the Islamic challenge was sometimes a reality and always a threat, Zar’a continued to incorporate Christianity into Ethiopia’s main line of internal defense; non-Christians were subject to execution. Zar’a Yaqob fought Muslim control of shipping around the Horn of Africa, and reports of his success made their way to Europe, which only added to the legitimacy of the Ethiopian basis for the Prester John legend.\textsuperscript{55}

The imprecision of the term “Indies” left the exact location of the kingdom of Prester John a bit of a mystery for late medieval Europeans. These lands, often referred to by Europeans in late medieval and early modern literature as the “Three Indies,” comprised the Indian subcontinent, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Horn of Africa.\textsuperscript{56} The modern concept of “continents” was not a part of the lexicon of European travelers, explorers, and mapmakers, and the shifting location of the kingdom of Prester John reflects this geographical ambiguity. Braude offered the following assessment of the fluid nature of geography to be found in the minds of late medieval and early modern Europeans:

> Even among mapmakers themselves, “Europe,” “Africa, and “Asia” had little significance. How else to explain the transposition of “Europe” and “Africa” on

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. 183.


the elaborate Hereford *mappamundi* of the early fourteenth century.\footnote{Denys Hay, *Europe: The Emergence of an Idea* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Publications, 1968), 54.} The Indias (like Ethiopia) were worlds unto their own, resembling Starpoint, the island of Dr. Doolittle’s discovery that was constantly floating between what we today might call Africa and Asia.\footnote{Braude, 109.}

As information about powerful rulers in the East trickled to Europe, the Prester John legend morphed to accommodate new details. The powerful Mongol Khans, for example, certainly may have influenced the geographic location of the priest-king. The rise of the powerful Ethiopian emperor Zar’a Yaqob in the fifteenth century likely drew attention to eastern Africa as a possible location of the mythical Christian ally named Prester John.

Born in 1399 the future emperor received religious training at Aksum and entered the monastery. Tradition holds that monks foretold of a “great future”\footnote{Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 68.} for the young man. Yaqob took the throne name of Kwestantinos, in honor of his approbation for the Roman emperor Constantine.\footnote{Ibid., 69.} Like his namesake, Zar’a Yaqob viewed Christianity as both a state religion and a force for national unification. Rumors of a resurgence of pagan beliefs began to circulate in the kingdom, including the alleged participation in heretical rituals by members of the royal court.\footnote{Robert L. Hess, *Ethiopia: The Modernization of Autocracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), 39-40.} The Ethiopian *Royal Chronicles* contain numerous references that attest to Yaqob’s insistence on Christian orthodoxy and
an adherence to the tenets of the faith by his subjects, including the following passage regarding idolatry:

At that time a herald read out the following proclamation, ‘Learn O you Christian people what Satan has done. We prohibited the worship of idols and the adoration of Dasek and Dino [pagan spirits worshipped by some subjects of the realm], but Satan has insinuated himself into our house and has led astray your children.’ He [Zar’a Yaqob] then ordered the latter to be punished; they were whipped before a crowd…

Yaqob exhibited another important trait consistent with European notions of Prester John: regal opulence. The Chronicles described Yaqob’s visit to Aksum at the time of his coronation, and his majestic entry into the city echoed not only the Prester John tradition, but also the Palm Sunday entry of Christ into Jerusalem. The following passage reflects the type of imagery evoked in the Chronicles:

When our King Zara Yaqob went into the district of Aksum to fulfill the law and effect the coronation ceremony…all the inhabitants…came to meet him and welcomed him with great rejoicing; the chiefs and soldiers of Tigre were on horseback carrying shield and lance, and the women, in great numbers gave themselves up, according to the ancient custom, to endless dancing…After arriving within the walls of Aksum the King had gold brought to him which he scattered…This amount of gold was more than a hundred ounces…

Yaqob also possessed another important qualification in order to be considered as the source of the Prester John legend: he was a brilliant military leader, and he successfully led expeditions against pagans and Muslims in the lands around his kingdom. The Chronicles recounted his battles against Arwe Badlay, who possessed an “innumerable army” that threatened the Ethiopians, and Yaqob surprised his followers by

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63 Ibid., 34.
initiating hostilities despite being woefully outnumbered. 64 The following excerpt describes the scene:

The Aqabe Saat,65 Amda Tseyon, made the following remark to him: 'Are you not too eager, my lord, to do battle without waiting for your army to come to your aid? You have only weak forces here; you are not prepared and have not put on your armour nor placed your army in battle array.'66

The pious Yaqob, according to the chronicler, did not place his trust in “the multitude of a host,” but instead declared “I have put my confidence in the Lord.”67 The Muslim rebel Badlay trembled in fear, having thought his forces were about to be besieged by a minor chief and not the mighty Yaqob himself. Despite a numerically inferior military force, Yaqob quickly destroyed his Muslim opponents: “The number of those killed was formidable; not a soldier survived out of the army of the enemy.”68

Accounts of the material wealth, spiritual piety, and political strength of Zar’a Yaqob must certainly have spread northward up the Nile River and along established trading routes with merchants and travelers. Fifteenth-century accounts demonstrated an increasing tendency toward locating Prester John in Abyssinia, and this was especially the case with the Portuguese. For Henry the Navigator - the Portuguese Infante Dom Henrique - the idea that there was an Ethiopian kingdom ruled by Prester John was a virtual certainty, and the fifteenth-century voyages of exploration he sponsored were focused – among other considerations – on making contact with the legendary priest-king. This emphasis on connecting with Prester John in an African setting continued to

64 Ibid., 36.
65 Important court official; literally, “guardian of the hour.” See Pankhurst, 197.
66 Ibid., 37.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 38.
dominate Portuguese voyages of exploration well into the seventeenth century. The next chapter of this dissertation examines how this interest in the legendary Prester John proved to be a primary motive in the journeys – real and imagined – that Europeans undertook to find the realm of the mysterious emperor.
Chapter Four
Late Medieval Travel Literature and Prester John

The genre of travel writing by European writers grew in popularity in the late medieval period, and this is in part due to the increasing numbers of Europeans traveling beyond the Middle East.¹ This was not a new form of literature, as accounts from European pilgrims, missionaries, and traders can be traced back to the Roman era,² but there emerged a change in thematic emphasis in European travel literature during the late medieval period away from the “sacred and the exotic”:

While these themes by no means disappeared in late medieval travel writing they were partially displaced or supplemented by a new need: the hunger for information. Travel writing became, above all else, a source of knowledge about the world, its natural features, and its peoples. This, I suggest, is the most distinctive element of late medieval travel writing on the Far East.³

Yet the “sacred and exotic” still occupied an essential place in the travel narratives of Europeans journeying eastward, even as the accounts began to include greater amounts of useful political, commercial, and ethnographic information. This chapter surveys a number of the influential travel narratives of the late medieval period, and provides a comparative analysis of the ways in which these accounts depict the legendary Prester John. Even among the European observers who provide relatively

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² For an excellent overview of early and high medieval travel literature, see Mary B. Campbell, The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
³ Phillips.
accurate accounts of their Eastern travels (i.e., those whose chronicles were less inclined to focus on frightening monsters and animals of dubious reality), the mystical priest-king of the Indies known as Prester John occupied an important place in their understanding of the less-traveled lands in the East.  

Benjamin of Tudela

Interestingly, one of the more important late medieval European travel accounts related to Prester John did not originate with a Christian pilgrim, a Venetian trader, or a papal envoy, but from a Jewish merchant from the Spanish region of Navarre. Little is known of the details of the life of Benjamin of Tudela, nor his primary motivations for the lengthy tour of Europe, Asia, and Africa in which he engaged, but his account has particular significance for the study of the legend of Prester John.

Based upon known information in his text that can be cross-referenced against other historical sources, Benjamin appears to have traveled between the years of 1160 and 1173. The original Hebrew manuscript contains over 100 pages of material that Benjamin gleaned during his journey, and Signer suggested that the author’s references to rabbinic literature suggest that this merchant-traveler was a member of an intellectual and social elite of twelfth century Andalusian Jews. Asher described him as a “very

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4 There is some debate over the use of the term “travel narrative” to describe a broad range of texts from authors with a wide variety of motives. Zumther argued that the “extreme diversity forbids it: circumstances of origin, intention, means, as much as the quality of the text itself.” See Paul Zumther and Catherine Peebles (translators), “The Medieval Travel Narrative,” New Literary History 25:4 (Autumn, 1994), 811.


6 Ibid., 16.

plain Jewish merchant” who used the particular Hebrew idiom in the manuscript because “he understood still less of any other” language. Signer, however, credits Benjamin of Tudela with far greater linguistic abilities, noting that he likely understood Arabic as well as possibly some of the Latin-based languages of the Iberian Peninsula and the southern Mediterranean. The manuscript and its later copies – plus the printed versions that began to appear in the sixteenth century – reached a relatively wide European audience. Asher argued that the “multiplied editions of it...prove that it has always been in request among the learned.”

Of interest to the discussion of the legend of Prester John is a passage in which Benjamin described a powerful king in the East. According to the narrative, the king’s name was Kofar-al-Turak, and this Asian king successfully destroyed the king of Persia. Benjamin claimed that Kofar-al-Turak’s forces “slew many of the Persian army, and the king of Persia fled with only a few followers to his own country.” The account seems contemporaneous with the 1141 defeat by the Kara-Khitai of the Kara-Khanids, who were nominally vassals of the Seljuks. The idea that the forces of Islam could be defeated by conquerors from the East – especially if they were fellow Christians – no doubt was welcome news in Europe. The series of twelfth and thirteenth century papal and royal embassies to the Turkic nomads known collectively as the Mongols was in part due to the credence placed in the account of Benjamin of Tudela.

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9 Signer, 17-18.

10 Asher, xiii.

11 Benjamin of Tudela, Itinerary, 88.
One of the four known papal embassies to the Mongols was led by Ascelin of Lombardia, whose 1245-48 expedition was recorded by the Dominican friar Simon of St. Quentin. Unfortunately, the original narrative left by Simon has been lost, though a significant portion of his work was later transcribed by Vincent of Beauvais, who will be briefly profiled later in this dissertation. Because of the lost original source material, a number of important details of the journey cannot be ascertained, including the exact route by which the papal embassy traveled. The group of Dominicans did manage to visit a Mongol general named Baiju, though during their visit to the Mongol camp the friars received a less-than-enthusiastic welcome, as advisors to Baiju suggested killing some of the ambassadors and holding the others as hostages. However, as Simon’s treatise is lost, scholars must rely on the writings of contemporaries such as Vincent of Beauvais, who possessed a copy of the Dominican friar’s account of the embassy to the Mongols.

Vincent of Beauvais was a Dominican friar who some scholars believe first served in the house of the Dominicans at Paris between 1215 and 1220, perhaps even spending time at the Dominican monastery at Beauvais. There is little debate that he held the post of reader at the monastery of Royaumont on the Oise between 1228 and 1235. The friar’s most important work was Speculum Maius (“The Great Mirror”), an encyclopedia that circulated widely in Europe into the seventeenth century; the complete

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13 Ibid., 237.

14 Ibid., 241.
encyclopedia was printed no less than three times in the fifteenth century, at least once in
the sixteenth, and one more time in the seventeenth century. The encyclopedic text
contained a great deal of information on the Mongols and the lands believed to be
controlled by Prester John, and Vincent drew heavily from the *Ystoria Mongalorum* of
the Franciscan John of Piano Carpini as well as the *Historia Tartarorum* of the Simon of
Saint-Quentin. Vincent’s *Speculum Historiale* also proved to be an influential work on
the evolution of the legendary kingdom of Prester John.

Among the elements of the writings of Vincent of Beauvais that are reflected in
the later beliefs of Europeans – and which appear repeatedly in later travel accounts – is
the idea that the Indies contained strange beings. Chief among these were the
Cynocephali (“dog-headed men”), a mythical species of creatures that likely had their
origin in the form of the Egyptian gods Hapi and Anubis. Vincent wrote that the
cynocephalus was an animal “with the head of the dog but with all other members of
human appearance.” Such a creature, noted the friar, generally comported itself like a
human being, “and, when peaceful, he is tender like a man, when furious, he becomes
cruel and retaliates on humankind.”

Through the pen of Vincent of Beauvais, the thoughts of Simon of St. Quentin
regarding the kingdom of Prester John have found their way to the present day. In
keeping with the tradition developed by Marco Polo, Simon reported that Chinggis Khan

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15 Gregory G. Guzman, “The Encyclopedist Vincent of Beauvais and His Mongol Extracts from

16 Ibid., 289.


18 Ibid.
married the daughter of King David, the son of Prester John. Simon claimed that the transfer of power from Prester John to King David occurred in 1202 CE. Vincent of Beauvais also marked a point at which the legends related to Prester John begin to diverge, as some later authors began to follow the tradition reinforced in *Speculum Historiale* that Prester John’s empire had been subsumed through marriage into that of the Mongols, while other versions of the legend followed the original narrative of a wholly autonomous and powerful Prester John of the Indies.

*William of Rubruck*

The association by Europeans of Prester John with various Asian potentates gained further substantiation with the writings of William of Rubruck (Willem van Ruysbroeck), a Flemish Franciscan monk who journeyed throughout the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century. He was connected with the court of Louis IX in Paris, and accompanied the French king on his crusade. Louis, later canonized despite his repeated failures as a crusader, developed a plan of converting the Tatars to Christianity, ostensibly ensuring that they would also become allies against the forces of Islam.

Rubruck began a lengthy missionary journey, possibly journeying at least part of the time with Venetian merchants, and he traveled first to visit Sartach, son of Batu and ruler of Kiptchak. Rubruck hoped to convert the Mongols to Christianity, and he set out

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20 Ibid.

21 This approach would be used by Sir John Mandeville, profiled later in this chapter of the dissertation.

in 1253 on a three-year tour of the lands of Batu Khan. He apparently reached the headquarters of Batu in 1254, a setting he described as on the Volga River. During the visit to the khan, Rubruck recorded that there was a lengthy debate between representatives of the Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian faiths, though the Mongol ruler did not appear to be swayed in any particular religious direction by the debaters.

Rubruck’s *Journey* has generally been well received by both contemporaries and modern historians. One researcher described the reasons why the travel narrative of William of Rubruck remains an important source of information about Central and Eastern Asia:

> Among the accounts left by 13th-14th century European travellers in the Mongol Empire, that of William of Rubruck occupies a place of prominence for the amplitude of its descriptive detail. Scholars have turned repeatedly to Rubruck’s account in search of historical and ethnographic information, and have rarely gone away empty-handed.

Rubruck apparently made the connection that the leader of the Tartars, the *gur-khan*, was a certain “King John,” a Nestorian potentate of particular renown in Central Asia. This connection between the various Mongol khan and the Prester John legend would continue to be made by many European writers and explorers in the succeeding six centuries. In the following excerpt Rubruck provided readers with a brief history of the manner by which Prester John rose to prominence:

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23 Silverberg, 101.


27 Willem van Ruysbroeck (William of Rubruck). *Account of the Mongols.*
And Caracarum is as it were in their territory, and all the land of the king of the Prester John and of Unc his brother, was round about this country, though they occupied the pasture lands to the north, while the Iugurs lived amidst the mountains to the south. So it happened that the Mo’al [Tartars] adopted their letters, and they are their best scribes, and nearly all the Nestorians know their letters.28

Rubruck also committed an etymological error in his translation of gur-khan; he separated the term into the Mongol words of kham (shaman) and khan (prince).29 By confusing the expression gur-khan, William of Rubruck may have imparted to Europeans the incorrect philological origin for the idea that Prester John was both a priest and a king.30

The Travels of Marco Polo

Perhaps the document that most completely cemented the idea of an Eastern Christian priest-king into the collective consciousness of Europeans was the travel narrative of Marco Polo. While Polo’s Travels has raised both contemporary and modern questions as to its authenticity,31 it nonetheless influenced such noteworthy European reconnaissance figures as Prince Henry of Portugal and Christopher Columbus. Polo’s narrative, despite its detractors, helped foster a greater interest in travel and commerce with lands to the east.

28 Ibid.

29 Clark, 185.

30 Silverberg, 110.

Polo provided his readers with a narrative that for the most part accurately depicted the geopolitical milieu of Eastern and Central Asia in the late thirteenth century. However, he also described the considerable powers of the mythical potentate Prester John in the following passage:

They [the Tartars] had no sovereign of their own, and were tributary to a powerful prince, who (as I have been informed) was named in their language, Un-khan, by some thought to have the same signification as Prester John in ours. To him these Tartars paid yearly the tenth part of the increase of their cattle. In time the tribe multiplied so exceedingly that Un-khan, that is to say, Prester John, becoming apprehensive of their strength, conceived the plan of separating them into different bodies, who should take up their abode in distinct tracts of country.  

Polo also described the overthrow of one Un-khan - the ruler who he believed to be Prester John - by the Mongol leader he named “Chingis-khan.” This person bears some similarities to the Mongol figure mentioned by William of Rubruck. Polo lauded the leadership capabilities of this Mongol ruler, some of which are in contrast with contemporary European views of the Mongols as barbaric savages. In the following passage Polo offered his assessment of how this ruler came to rise to such a position of prominence:

Some time after the migration of the Tartars to this place, and about the year of our Lord 1162, they proceeded to elect for their king a man named Chingis-khan, one of approved integrity, great wisdom, commanding eloquence, and eminent for his valour. He began his reign with so much justice and moderation, that he was beloved and revered as their deity rather than their sovereign; and as the fame of his great and good qualities spread over that part of the world, all the Tartars, however dispersed, placed themselves under his command.

The “overthrow” of Prester John – or in this case, the figure of Un-khan seized upon by Marco Polo as the elusive priest-king Prester John – is of some interest to this

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33 Ibid., 86.
dissertation. It is indeed possible that some later readers of Polo’s account may have arrived at the conclusion that the kingdom of Prester John was somehow subsumed by that of the “Chinggis-khan” described by Polo. Since this account illustrated a defeat of the legendary Prester John, later figures such as Columbus might then have demonstrated greater interest in a khan-type figure, or similarly began to blend attributes of the kingdom of Prester John into those associated with the Mongol khanates. This is a phenomenon that will be described elsewhere in this chapter as a sort of hybrid “Prester-khan” figure, a monarch bearing a title related to the Mongol khans but possessing characteristics of Prester John, perhaps even including some form of Nestorian Christianity. This hybrid sense of a “Prester-khan” also owes something to legends that arose in part from narratives of later papal embassies suggesting that Chinggis Khan wedded the daughter of King David, who was purported to be the son of Prester John, and that by extension the mother of Ogodei Khan was a Christian.34

In short, the travel narrative of Marco Polo lent a considerable amount of additional credibility to Prester John legend. Polo, in the eyes of Europeans, was a man who had traveled through the lands of the great Prester John. While Polo had not actually seen the mythical potentate, his narrative provided textual “proof” of the veracity of the legend. Polo made sure to differentiate between information he personally witnessed and that which he heard from other sources, though to the casual reader, his account remained an authoritative text for many centuries. The Polo narrative about the kingdom of Prester John also contrasted sharply with the account of an armchair traveler whose description

One of the most fanciful accounts of the legendary priest-king was that generated by the travel chronicler Sir John Mandeville. The author claimed to be a knight, and that he was born in St. Albans, France. The historical basis of the authorship is itself the subject of debate, as definitive proof that such a person ever existed has not been established, and the author likely borrowed heavily from the narratives of such writers as William of Boldensele, Giovanni de Pian Carpini, and Odoric of Pordenone. However, as with Prester John, authenticity is in the eye of the beholder; if an idea is believed, and influences people to act in particular ways, the question of its accuracy is less relevant. Moreover, the importance of the Mandeville text lies not in its accuracy but rather in its pervasive influence. Benjamin Braude described *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* as “the single most popular European work of secular literature in the late medieval, early modern period.” The text was translated into at least ten languages, and there are no less than three hundred extant manuscripts from ninety editions published between 1475 and 1600.

Readers will observe the influence of the Mandeville text in a wide variety of narratives and accounts in later chapters of this study, but suffice for the moment to say

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37 Zumther, 819.
that no single text has exhibited greater effects on the evolution and continuance of the 
Prester John legend. Finally, as Braude noted, the narrative of Mandeville reached 
audiences far beyond the literate elites of European royal courts and centers of learning:

That it [the Mandeville text] existed primarily in spoken languages and regional 
dialects, thereby accessible to those to whom it could be read aloud, makes it a 
unique influence and reflection of the values and assumptions of the under-
lettered and unlettered of European society.\textsuperscript{38}

Mandeville, whose work has been described as “a clever compilation of material 
from a variety of different sources,”\textsuperscript{39} included a description of the astonishing kingdom 
of Prester John that he claimed to have viewed on his journey. Mandeville’s expedition 
allegedly began in 1322, and Mandeville offered a captivating first-person account of the 
legendary priest-king. In the following excerpt, Mandeville presented readers with an 
overview of the mythical potentate’s realm:

This emperor, Prester John, holds full great land, and hath many full noble cities 
and good towns in his realm, and many great diverse isles and large. For all the 
country of Ind is devised in isles for the great floods that come from Paradise, that 
depart all the land in many parts. And also in the sea he hath full many isles. And 
the best city in the Isle of Pentexoire is Nyse, that is a full royal city and a noble, 
and full rich... And he hath under him seventy-two provinces, and in every 
province is a king. And these kings have kings under them, and all be tributaries 
to Prester John. And he hath in his lordships many great marvels.\textsuperscript{40}

However, Prester John possessed far more than mere political power, according to 
Mandeville. His purported wealth exceeded even the imagination of the greediest reader, 
and this fanciful account could not help but to fuel curiosity in the minds of European

\textsuperscript{38} Braude, 116.


\textsuperscript{40} Mandeville, Chapter XXX.
readers about Prester John. The following passage highlights the fantastic wealth to be
found in the palace of Prester John:

He dwelleth commonly in the city of Susa. And there is his principal palace, that
is so rich and so noble, that no man will trow it by estimation, but he had seen it.
And above the chief tower of the palace be two round pommels of gold, and in
everych of them be two carbuncles great and large, that shine full bright upon the
night. And the principal gates of his palace be of precious stone that men clepe
sardonyx, and the border and the bars be of ivory. And the windows of the halls
and chambers be of crystal. And the tables whereon men eat, some be of emeralds,
some of amethyst, and some of gold, full of precious stones; and the pillars that
bear up the tables be of the same precious stones. And the degrees to go up to his
throne, where he sitteth at the meat, one is of onyx, another is of crystal, and
another of jasper green, another of amethyst, another of sardine, another of
cornelian, and the seventh, that he setteth on his feet, is of chrysolite. And all
these degrees be bordered with fine gold, with the other precious stones, set with
great pearsls orient. And the sides of the siege of his throne be of emeralds, and
bordered with gold full nobly, and dubbed with other precious stones and great
pearls. And all the pillars in his chamber be of fine gold with precious stones, and
with many carbuncles, that give great light upon the night to all people. 41

One of the more significant criticisms of Mandeville’s work is the presence of a
large assortment of highly unusual (and biologically specious) beasts, a text that has a
reputation among scholars as being “a wonder-book chiefly composed of lies.” 42 While
these bizarre creatures certainly fed the voracious imaginations of late medieval and early
modern Europeans, their inclusion reduced the likelihood that Mandeville ever visited the
lands about which he wrote. The following is a particularly fantastic passage about the
creatures described in Mandeville’s account that could be found in the lands under the
dominion of Prester John:

After this, beyond the vale, is a great isle, where the folk be great giants of
twenty-eight foot long, or of thirty foot long. And they have no clothing but of
skins of beasts that they hang upon them. And they eat no bread, but all raw flesh;
and they drink milk of beasts, for they have plenty of all bestial. And they have no

41 Ibid.

42 Moseley, 6.
houses to lie in. And they eat more gladly man's flesh than any other flesh. Into that isle dare no man gladly enter.\footnote{Mandeville, Chapter XXXI.}

While European readers might have scoffed at some of the more extreme and fanciful pieces of information in the various Mandeville texts, it is clear that \textit{The Travels of Sir John Mandeville} reached a wide audience in the fourteenth into the seventeenth centuries. Richard Hakluyt described Mandeville as \textit{eruditum et insignem Authorem},\footnote{Richard Hakluyt, \textit{The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation: Made by Sea or Over-land to the Remote and Farthest Distant Quarters of the Earth at any Time within the Compass of these 1600 Yeares. Volumes 1-10} (Glasgow : J. MacLehose and Sons, 1903-05), Chapter 330. It should be noted that Hakluyt did not include Mandeville’s narrative in the 1598 edition, though there is some debate as to whether Hakluyt cut the Mandeville material because of possible doubts about its veracity or simply because Mandeville was so widely available. See Helfers, James P. “The Explorer or the Pilgrim? Modern Critical Opinion and the Editorial Methods of Richard Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas.” \textit{Studies in Philology}, 94:2 (Spring, 1997), 179.}\footnote{Ibid.} and he noted that any problems with Mandeville’s \textit{Travels} are merely the result of poor transcriptions by scribes and printers.\footnote{Josephine Waters Bennett made a convincing case for the notion that even Geoffrey Chaucer was familiar with and referenced Mandeville in \textit{The Canterbury Tales}. See “Chaucer and Mandeville’s Travels,” \textit{Modern Language Notes} 68:8 (Dec., 1953), 531-534.} Many travel accounts referenced Mandeville, especially in describing lands that the traveler did not personally visit, and many of the most illustrious names in European exploration and literature were familiar with the Mandeville narrative.\footnote{Ibid.} Moseley in particular issued a call to the academy to reassess the role played by Mandeville in the first centuries of European expansion, arguing that the imaginative travel writer had a far greater influence than previously assumed. In the following passage he discussed the reasons why Mandeville should not be dismissed as little more than a purveyor of fantastic myths:

Clearly, at the very end of the period when Europe was a world to itself, some of the foremost geographical thinkers of the day were using the later despised...
Mandeville quite seriously as a source of hard information—the best available... We should take Mandeville’s book far more seriously than we generally do; his ideas and his descriptions will more than probably be found to have been influential in shaping the world view of the generation that discovered America and forthwith scoured it for Prester John, Cathay, sciapods and, tragically, Mandeville’s Fountain of Youth.47

More importantly, though, is the fact that Mandeville’s *Travels*—as an authoritative text upon which many later writers relied—found its way deliberately or inadvertently into many dozens of texts. Moseley noted that “in the works of information of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we are frequently reading unacknowledged extracts from the Travel.”48 Moreover, as Edward Peters observed, Mandeville himself understood an important characteristic of Europeans in the late medieval period, something of a nascent wanderlust:

In a particularly striking passage Mandeville even asks why it is that Europeans seem to need travel and the remotest parts of the world more than other cultures do. His answer is that Europeans are more astrologically inclined to travel than other peoples because they live under the sign of the Moon.49

While later European travel narratives and exploration might not directly cite Mandeville, even a cursory glance at the later works of Europeans such as Hakluyt, Linschoten, and Duarte Lopes demonstrates the degree to which Mandeville exerted influence well into the seventeenth century. Interestingly, the account with the greater amount of factual material— that of Marco Polo—was dismissed by many contemporaries as a fabrication,50 while Mandeville’s narrative remained a definitive component of

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48 Moseley, 10.
authoritative European texts for the next several centuries. The legend of Prester John
owed much to the fanciful stylings of this unknown author.

Unfortunately, Mandeville’s reputation among historians and philologists has
suffered in the past century. This may be in part due to unintentional historical
presentism on the part of scholars, who might be inclined toward discounting the degree
to which Mandeville’s fantastic narrative still possessed currency with early modern
European cartographers, writers, and explorers. Josephine Waters Bennett, long
considered to be one of the leading Mandeville scholars, argued that “”the new school of
geographers and cartographers which grew up in the sixteenth century did not believe
Mandeville's stories.”51

Influenced by the account of Sir John Mandeville, one of the most popular
chivalric travel narratives – one that functioned more as a medieval romance than as an
atlas - was written in Florence about 1400 by Andrea da Barberino.52 The text was
entitled Guerrino il Meschino, and Leonard Olschki described it as a “fantastic and
confused description of the countries and wonders of Tartary, India, and other regions of
Asia and Africa.”53

Barberino lived from approximately 1371 to 1431, and authored a number of
romances in addition to Guerrino il Meschino. Unlike his contemporaries, though,

51 Josephine Waters Bennett, The Rediscovery of Sir John Mandeville ( New York: Modern
Language Association of America, 1954), 240.

52 There is some debate about the extent to which the writings of Mandeville influence Barberino’s
Guerrino il Meschino. Gloria Allaire argued that “the juxtaposition of nonfictional structures and material
with conventional chivalric narrative...seems to be a feat unique to Andrea.” See Gloria Allaire, “Portrayal
of Muslims in Andrea da Barberino’s Guerrino il Meschino,” in Tolan, John Victor (ed.), Medieval

26:2 (Jun., 1944), 96.
Barberino wrote in prose instead of the more common metered poetry typical of Italian writers in these genres.\textsuperscript{54} Decidedly Mandevillian in its fantastic scope, Barberino’s *Guerrino il Meschino* reinforced notions of a wealthy and powerful eastern ruler whose realm was close to the earthly Paradise and whose lands featured a variety of strange beasts and half-human creatures.

*Ruy Gonzalez De Clavijo*

The 1403 journey of the Castilian Ruy Gonzalez De Clavijo to the court of the Mongol emperor Tamerlane served two important functions. By gaining an audience with this powerful Central Asian potentate, Clavijo established at least nominal (or perhaps potential) diplomatic connections between European and Asian rulers during the fourteen months he spent at Tamerlane’s court.\textsuperscript{55} Clavijo, however, inadvertently helped fuel the East-West alliance obsession displayed by late medieval and early modern Europeans. Despite his nominal Islamic faith Tamerlane was, after all, an exotic, powerful, and wealthy Asian emperor, emblematic of the types of monarchs that might be convinced to ally with the Europeans.

The embassy to Samarkand – Tamerlane’s imperial city – also kept alive the Prester John legend, for Clavijo reported rumors of a Christian potentate in Greater India. This unnamed ruler was so powerful that even the mighty Tamerlane could not conquer him. Clavijo offered up the following summation of the dominant monarch who reigned


in what he termed “Greater India,” which is in keeping with the lands associated with the legendary Prester John:

The major part of that India (which is Greater India) the king still keeps in his possession…since then [a battle lost to Tamerlane in which present-day Afghanistan was ceded to the Mongols] neither Timur [Tamerlane] nor the Prince his grandson has ever sought again to invade that country. The people of Greater India are Christians for the most part as is also their king, but they are of the Greek rite…

Clavijo also described the Emperor of Cathay (China) in terms that meshed with the European concept of Prester John. This Emperor, to whom Tamerlane was subject, ruled over vast dominions, and his court was in the city of Cambaluc, a city “twenty times larger than Tabriz.” The Emperor was so powerful, according to Clavijo, that he could leave “400,000 horse-men behind to guard his realm together with numerous regiments of footguards” on those occasions when he led armies abroad. Clavijo reported that nobles in this kingdom were prohibited from appearing in public with fewer than one thousand horsemen. While never referring to this ruler by the name Prester John (Clavijo might have been far too abstemious of a chronicler for such an imaginative stretch, or might perhaps be an early advocate of the “Prester-khan” theory), the Castilian emissary kept fueled the fires of hope that a Christian ally in the East would join forces with Europeans against the forces of Islam. Clavijo’s account was also appropriated and


57 This is likely a phonetic approximation of KhanBalik, the Mongol word for “Great City of the Khan.”

58 Clavijo, 292.

59 Ibid.
integrated by Gómez de Santisteban into his *Don Pedro* narrative, which is profiled in greater depth in the fifth chapter of this dissertation. The Clavijo narrative also influenced fifteenth century editions of the Mandeville text.

*Letter from Prester John to the Emperor of Rome and the King of France (1500)*

The invention of the printing press aided the growth in awareness among Europeans of the legendary Prester John, and the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries might be considered the golden age of literature related to Prester John’s mythical kingdom. Various versions of letters purported to have been penned by Prester John found their way into print form. One popular example of this genre was a French language version of a letter to the king of France and the Holy Roman Emperor, and a transcription of this letter went through at least fourteen different editions between 1488 and 1522. A complete transcription of an English translation of an edition from 1500 can be found in Appendix B of this dissertation.

There are decidedly different tones used by the author of the original letter of Prester John to Byzantine emperor Emanuel Komnenos and the author of the French version. The earlier Prester John letter exudes a haughtiness that borders on condescension, and the author dismissed the Byzantine emperor as “the Prince of Constantinople.” In the later French version, the letter begins with “greetings to the Emperor of Rome and the King of France, our friends.” The author still pained to make this Prester John particularly powerful - as evident by the claim that he possessed “the highest crown on earth as well as gold, silver, precious stones and strong fortresses, cities,

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61 Slessarev, 64.
towns, castles, and boroughs” – yet this was a more congenial Prester John, one better suited to mutually beneficial alliances.

Much like the previous versions of the Prester John letters, the French version contains references to a magical fountain of life. However, this version provides greater detail about the restorative properties of the miraculous liquid that benefited those who partook of the natural elixir. The letter writer noted that “whoever drinks of its water three times on an empty stomach will have no sickness for thirty years; and when he has drunk of it, he will feel as if he has eaten the best meat and spices, for it is full of God’s grace.”62 Moreover, added the author, any person who bathed in the fountain, “be he of a hundred or thousand years, will regain the age of thirty-two.”63 As testimony to the beneficial powers of the fountain’s water, the author claimed that Prester John had attained the impressive age of 562 years as a result of bathing in the fountain six times since he was born.

This French version of the letter of Prester John also includes a significant number of intriguing passages related to a certain “Great King of Israel.” The emphasis on Jews and a Jewish kingdom in close proximity to the kingdom of Prester John suggests that the letter writer was making some sort of connection to the legendary Lost Tribes of Israel. Perhaps the letter writer was of Jewish heritage, and the letter was composed to create the impression that Europe’s perennially persecuted Jews had a powerful ally of their own. As we will see in the next letter from Prester John, a wide

62 Ibid., 71.
63 Ibid., 71-72.
variety of variations in content suggest an even more diverse realm of possibilities into the reasons why these fraudulent letters were composed.

Letter from Johannes Africanus (circa 1500)

Among the more interesting of the dozens of Prester John letters is a document that was recently discovered in the archives of an Alexandrine library. The unknown author of the letter composed the text in a Syriac dialect, and the noted African historian Olu Oguibe produced and English translation of the letter. What makes this particular document noteworthy is that the author, who claimed to be Johannes Africanus (“John the African”), identified the nucleus of his empire as being the regions of “Abyssinia and Greater India.” This location, of course, is in contrast with earlier Prester John letters, which placed the priest-king in the vaguely defined Indies as opposed to a more specific Ethiopian setting. This Prester John, however, presented himself in a less flattering manner than the previous incarnations of a mighty Christian potentate as imagined by the authors of earlier letters:

Prester John, once the most powerful king over all Christian kings. Lord Sovereign over Abyssinia and Greater India, and of all the lands and principalities that stretch from Atlantis to the Tower of Babel, but by the Grace of God brought low and redeemed, and now no more than a humble steward and laborer in the vineyard of our Lord and Savior, greetings to the Mighty Ruler of the New World and his brother kings, the Ruler of the Anglo-Saxons and the French, in friendship and the fellowship of Faith and the Holy Trinity.

The reason for this more contrite version of Prester John, explained the author of the letter, owed much to the realization by the priest-king that he had previously been guilty of excessive pride. The following excerpt discusses the process by which Prester John

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65 Ibid.
shed his boastful ways and realized that such arrogance was not in keeping with the expectations of God:

But the Lord God spoke to us and said, take heed, Abyssinia, take heed you of Biafra and Benin and India and Great Guinea, you of South Atlantis take heed for pride goes before a fall. There is no might above God's, and all that make known their haughtiness. He shall break the back of their pride. Like He broke the back of Nebuchadnezzar the Assyrian, and Magdai the Syrian, and the Great Ung Kan, and Atila the Hun, and Alexander, and laid low their kingdoms and razed their fortresses to the ground, so shall He lay low all who swagger in vainglory and pride.66

Yet like earlier versions, this humbler edition of Prester John did not fail to titillate readers with the exotic creatures that could be found in his kingdom. Unicorns and “wild Bulls of seventeen horns” were among the beasts of the realm, as were “Lions of which color there are blue, red, orange and black.”67 Visitors to the kingdom of Prester John would also find “wild Asses with two horns, one on their forehead and the other to their rear, and flying Turtles, and Boars which served in times past as beasts for cavalry.”68

The author of this letter evidently had some knowledge of the traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. In keeping with the historical beliefs of the church, the author noted that the priests “in that country [Abyssinia] are commanded by our Lord to keep custody of the Holy Ark and to attend to the spirit of the Patriarch of the Eunuch and the Apostle Philip.” Church leaders have long maintained that a particular church known as Our Lady Mary of Zion, which is located in Axum, contains the original

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66 Ibid., 63.

67 Ibid., 65.

68 Ibid.
Ark of the Covenant.\textsuperscript{69} There is also an unusual passage in which the author of this Prester John letter promotes pacifism. Previous letters discussed how the kingdom of Prester John had evolved beyond war and strife within its borders, but the author of this letter asked that “in place of war and strife your great nation commits to peace and friendly co-existence with all, including the Heathen and the Musulman, for we are all created of the same God and if there be judgment, it shall be His and no man's.”\textsuperscript{70} This idea of harmony between adherents of different religions seems almost anachronous, given the centuries of warfare between the Christian and Islamic worlds and the heightened rhetoric on both sides. Perhaps the author of this missive lived in a region that served as a battleground between the opposing forces of the two religions.

The letter from the so-called Johannes Africanus also contains a strange passage completely unlike any of the previous letters. The author claimed that Prester John possessed “machines that fly with metal wings, and may cover a whole moon's journey by horse in one day,” and that “we and our ministers and brother priests have flown in these machines and we can assure you that they are a major wonder of the world.” This high-tech version of Prester John also sent his “finest scientists to walk on the moon and other planets, and they have brought back with them precious stones, mirrors, and magical powders that give anyone who carries them premonition of the future and a complete recollection of all ages past.”\textsuperscript{71} Even more intriguing, the letter writer claimed that the scientists of Prester John “travel in metal balls of fire that look no different than the moon itself when it is up

\textsuperscript{69} Paul Raffaele, “Keepers of the Lost Ark?” \textit{Smithsonian} (Dec. 2007), 41.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
in the heavens,” and that “these machines are also capable of destroying entire races and civilizations by setting them on fire.”  

Oguibe did not offer any commentary on the letter’s author in his translation, but it seems as though the writer had access to previous letters, given the references made to the former boastfulness of Prester John. The intentions of the letter writer seem less apparent; there are no obvious overtures being made, and the purpose of the letter may simply be the stated goal of “friendship and the fellowship of Faith and the Holy Trinity.” The letter also seems less cohesive than previous versions of Prester John missives to his European counterparts, and the aforementioned deviations from the standard Prester John features stand out as especially puzzling and occasionally contradictory. One interpretation might be that the letter writer sought to dissuade would-be European visitors from traveling to the lands of Prester John, perhaps because such journeys might send armed bands across territories desirous of avoiding such contact. Perhaps too this was a letter simply designed for the purpose of bringing attention or financial gain to its “discoverer,” as the value of monopolized knowledge was recognized as much in the past as it might be today in, for example, the patent potential of the fruits of research in a laboratory of high technology.

Penned by an unknown number of writers with widely divergent goals, the letters of Prester John fanned out across Europe in the late medieval and early modern periods, and prior to the invention of the printing press hundreds of monks painstakingly recopied the letters for dissemination to royal courts and the emerging centers of scholastic thought, the universities. These letters helped promote the development of the literary

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., 62.
genre of the medieval travel narrative, some of which prominently featured the legendary Prester John. The varied nature of the motives behind the letters purported to be from the hand of the legendary priest-king suggests that the writers of these missives were influenced by a number of real-life figures, which is the focus of the next chapter of this dissertation.
Chapter Five  
Fifteenth Century European Exploration and Prester John  

While Europeans continued in the fifteenth century to travel eastward on individual pilgrimages, papal embassies, and trade delegations, it was in the sphere of planned voyages of exploration that knowledge began to expand about lands beyond the Mediterranean basin. Leading the way among European powers was the Iberian kingdom of Portugal, which possessed a number of advantages over many of its potential European contenders. The Portuguese solidified their borders and achieved their own Reconquista centuries before the Spaniards, while Portugal also possessed religious unity that eluded most of the rest of Europe during the religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In addition, the Portuguese enjoyed a lengthy seaboard and an extensive maritime tradition, and the captains of their fifteenth century voyages of exploration were able to recruit from the ranks of the many fishing vessels that plied the waters of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.¹

Yet perhaps the most important of the characteristics possessed by the Portuguese was an intangible sense of importance, perhaps a collective perception of historical destiny. Scammell described this phenomenon as the “Messianic belief, common to the

Iberians, that they were in some special way charged with the defence and propagation of the Faith.”

**Prester John, Prince Henry, and the Portuguese Voyages of Discovery**

The debate over the historical basis for the evolution of the Prester John myth has occasionally lost sight of an important detail: whether or not Prester John had any historical legitimacy, the legendary priest-king played a significant role in the era of European exploration, expansion, and exploitation of Asia and Africa. The example of Prince Henry, the Infante Dom Henrique of Portugal, illustrated the degree to which the imagined personage of Prester John influenced European leaders, explorers, and intellectuals.

Born in 1394, Henry was the fourth son of João I and Queen Philippa, who were monarchs from the house of Aviz. Henry and his brothers lived in an era where honor was as much earned as inherited, as the medieval concept of chivalry still held sway in European courts. Given this worldview, it is not surprising that João I acquiesced to the wishes of his sons and assembled forces in an attack on the Muslim stronghold of Ceuta in 1415. This baptism of blood was a traditional manner by which nobles proved their relative valor. In addition, the expedition fed the crusading spirit of these *fildalgos*, as there was no greater glory than that which could be attained through the defeat of the warriors of Islam.

The Portuguese conquest of Ceuta served larger purposes than simply to win knightly spurs for the sons of João I. This victory over the forces of Allah rekindled

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dreams of a unified Christendom that could subdue Islam in a multi-pronged conflict. The prospect of a triumphant military and religious unification with distant Christian empires thus increased in its attraction to European leaders. The battle itself was almost anticlimactic, because the 45,000 men who traveled on 200 Portuguese ships caught the defenders of Ceuta off guard. An attack that commenced on the morning of 14 August 1415 ended with the capture of the town by nightfall, and the Infante Dom Henrique distinguished himself in battle, being wounded during the conquest of the city that was known as the “Key to the Mediterranean.”

What we know of Dom Henrique and the capture of Ceuta come to us largely through the writings of Gomes Eanes de Azurara. One of Azurara’s most important contributions is his delineation of Prince Henry’s motivations for his sponsorship of voyages of exploration. In *Crónica da tomada de Ceuta* Azurara discussed the importance for the sons of Portuguese nobility to earn their proverbial spurs in a glorious battle against the Muslims (fazer seus filhos cavaleiros o mais honrradamente que se bem podesse fazer- “to make his sons cavaleiros, the most honorable that they could become”). The prince, according to Azurara in *Crónica do descobrimento e conquista da Guiné*, had six reasons for his exploratory zeal. The first was "a wish to know what lands there were beyond the Canary Isles and a cape which was called Bojador.” Azurara next declared that Dom Henrique wished to develop trade with distant lands "which the traffic would bring great profit to our natives;" specifically, the Portuguese hoped to tap

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4 Silverberg, 195.


6 Miall, 130.
into the trans-Saharan gold, ivory, and slave trades. The third reason, explained Azurara, was to learn the extent of Muslim influence in Africa, because “every wise man is moved by the desire to know the strength of his enemy.”

Henrique’s fourth motivation in the process of exploration was the desire to find a Christian monarch who would provide the Portuguese with an ally in its struggle with the forces of Islam: the fabled Prester John.

The Infante also wanted to dispatch missionaries “to increase the holy faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ” and “to lead to this faith all souls desirous of being saved.” Finally, Azurara cited an astrological aspect to the worldview of Dom Henrique, noting that the alignment of the planets proved that the Infante “was bound to engage in great and noble conquests, and above all he was bound to attempt the discovery of things which were hidden from other men.”

The conquest of the stronghold of Ceuta meant that one of the major northern trade centers of the Islamic world was now in the possession of the Portuguese crown. This African conquest was the first significant ripple in a wave of European expansion that would eventually reach every continent on the globe. The gold, slaves, and ivory that caravans of Muslim traders brought across the sands of the Sahara and into Ceuta undoubtedly piqued the mercantile interests of Prince Henry.

The role of commerce cannot be discounted in any analysis of European exploration, expansion, and exploitation. After claiming the city of Ceuta as a

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7 Ibid., 131.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 132.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 133.
Portuguese possession, João I and his three remaining sons – Afonso died as a child in 1400 - became keenly interested in the trans-Saharan trade routes. The lure of Guinean gold most certainly interested the Portuguese monarchs, and the possibility of African riches factored into the overseas expeditions of discovery. However, of equal or greater importance to Prince Henry was to “have knowledge also of the Indies and of the land of Prester John.”

It is not surprising that one of the trusted advisors that João I turned to when weighing the merits of the Ceuta plan was his Franciscan confessor, Frei João de Jeira, who later addressed the armada before its departure. Moreover, the capture of Ceuta – more than any other single event – was perhaps the most significant jumping-off point for European expansion. This was a pivotal episode that Eric Axelson maintained “burst the geographical bounds of Europe; it initiated expansion into Africa – and beyond.”

The gratitude that the Catholic Church exhibited towards the House of Aviz and the Portuguese Infante Henrique was documented in the papal bull *In Apostolice Dignitatis Specula*. This document, written in 1420 in response to a petition from João I, named Prince Henry as the administrator of the Order of Christ. This prestigious post served as a financial and political launching pad for many of the voyages of exploration.

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that Prince Henry sponsored.\textsuperscript{16} Skilled manpower, state-of-the-art ships, and access to Church finances were among the benefits that Henry could draw upon after his acceptance of this post.

In addition, João I named Prince Henry as Governor of the Algarve shortly before the papal bull arrived in Lisbon. The ascetic prince moved to a compound at Cape Sagres on the southern coast of Portugal, and thus began one of the most storied chapters in the history of European exploration.\textsuperscript{17} The Infante assembled a collection of specialists with skills useful for maritime discovery, and - though while not a “school” in the modern sense of the word - Prince Henry’s enclave attracted geographers, travelers, merchants, and inventors. From this base the Portuguese began the process of enlarging the worldview of Europe.

In the \textit{Crónica} of Azurara is found a narrative of the life of the prescient Portuguese prince, and - as a member of the royal court - Azurara would have been in a position to have intimate knowledge of the Infante.\textsuperscript{18} He described the Prince’s strategic objectives in the formation of the voyages of exploration. The development of geographical knowledge certainly preoccupied Henry, and the ever-present commercial drive cannot be overlooked. The potential of enormous profits from Indian spices, the routes to which were controlled at that time by Venetian interests, must have certainly enticed Prince Henry.\textsuperscript{19} However, there were also political and religious dimensions to his aspirations:

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Parry, 35.
[to discover] if there were in those parts any Christian princes, in whom the charity and the love of Christ was so ingrained that they would aid him against those enemies of the faith...[he desired to have knowledge not only of Africa and the Indies but] of the land of Prester John, as well.²⁰

Prince Henry reinvigorated the drive to reunite the various branches of Christianity with the end goal of destroying Islam. Underlying the religious motivation to strengthen Christianity, however, must certainly have been a decidedly geopolitical impulse. Prester John represented to Europeans a formidable ally in the fight against Islam, and the letters and narratives associated with him depicted an ultra-pious warrior for the faith: this was a man with the potential to both heal the Church and smite the heathen Muslims. Indeed, according to Azurara one of the consistent mandates that Prince Henry gave to captains in his employ (or who captained voyages with his approval) was that they attempt to make contact with Prester John.²¹ The search for the mythical priest-king, however, no longer needed to be conducted over tortuous land routes, but could utilize the caravelas of Portuguese explorers in partnership with the Crown.

The efforts of the Infante Dom Henrique to spread the Gospel, convert the heathens, and seek Christian allies in distant lands were not unnoticed by contemporaries around the European continent. Pope Nicholas V issued a papal bull (*Romanus Pontifex*, 1455) that called for European monarchs to aid Prince Henry’s various endeavors of discovery in the hopes of furthering the larger goals of the propagation of the Faith and connecting with Christian rulers in distant lands:

²⁰ Silverberg, 197.

²¹ Azurara, *Crónica*, Chapter XVI, 94.
We have lately heard, not without great joy and gratification, how our beloved son, the noble personage Henry, infante of Portugal… has aspired from his early youth with his utmost might to cause the most glorious name of the said Creator to be published, extolled, and revered throughout the whole world… it had come to the knowledge of the said infante that never…had it been customary to sail on this ocean sea toward the southern and eastern shores, and that it was so unknown to us westerners that we had no certain knowledge of the peoples of those parts, believing that he would best perform his duty to God in this matter, if by his effort and industry that sea might become navigable as far as to the Indians who are said to worship the name of Christ, and that thus he might be able to enter into relation with them, and to incite them to aid the Christians against the Saracens and other such enemies of the faith, [emphasis added] and might also be able forthwith to subdue certain gentile or pagan peoples, living between, who are entirely free from infection by the sect of the most impious Mahomet, and to preach and cause to be preached to them the unknown but most sacred name of Christ, strengthened, however, always by the royal authority, he has not ceased for twenty-five years past to send almost yearly an army of the peoples of the said kingdoms with the greatest labor, danger, and expense, in very swift ships called caravels, to explore the sea and coast lands toward the south and the Antarctic pole.\(^22\)

In addition, Prince Henry with his Portuguese voyages of exploration received under this document papal “permission” to claim newly discovered territory for the Aviz crown. This official stamp of approval placed the Portuguese in an enviable place among its would-be European competitors. Furthermore, Nicholas V decreed that Portuguese claims carried a particularly strong papal approbation; the following excerpt delineates the high regard held by the members of the House of Aviz:

[T]hese islands, lands, harbors and seas…belong…to the said King Alfonso and his successors, nor without special license from King Alfonso and his successors has any other even of the faithful of Christ been entitled hitherto, nor is he by any means now entitled lawfully to meddle therewith – in order that King Alfonso himself and his successors and the infante may be able the more zealously to pursue…this most pious and noble work…\(^23\)


\(^{23}\) Ibid.
Thus, the noble quests for pagan souls and Prester John derived for the Portuguese an additional benefit: a seemingly unlimited right to control Asian trade. Nicholas V was quite specific in this broad delineation of Portuguese trading rights; in the following passage he specified the terms of the agreement:

the aforesaid King Alfonso and [his] successors and the infante…may…make purchases and sales of any things and goods and victuals whatsoever, as it shall seem fit, with any Saracens or infidels, in the said regions; and also may enter into any contracts, transact business, bargain, buy and negotiate, and carry any commodities whatsoever to the places of those Saracens and infidels…

The only exceptions to this grant were the tools of war, such as armor and weaponry, which would pose obvious problems in providing potential enemies of Christianity with up-to-date military technology.

The generous grant to King Alfonso by Pope Nicholas V was seconded by his successor, Pope Calixtus III. The continuation of the pro-Portuguese overseas policies is likely indicative of the high importance to which Calixtus placed on uncompromising dealings with the Islamic world.

Calixtus further defined the territorial rights of the Portuguese:

Moreover by the authority and with the knowledge aforesaid, we determine, ordain, and appoint forever that ecclesiastical and all ordinary jurisdiction, lordship, and power, in ecclesiastical matters only, in islands, villages, harbors, lands, and places, acquired and to be acquired from capes Bojador and Nam as far through Guinea, and past that southern shore all the way to the Indians, the position, number, nature, appellations, designations, bounds, and localities of which we wish to be considered as expressed by these presents, shall belong and pertain to said military order [the Order of Jesus Christ] for all time; and in

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24 Ibid.

25 Calixtus III vigorously called for a crusade against the Turks in 1455, reiterating an earlier plea by Nicholas V, though his rhetoric failed to spark much enthusiasm among the monarchs of Europe. See Jonathan Riley-Smith, The Crusades: A History (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 276.
accordance with the tenor of these presents, by the authority and knowledge aforesaid, we grant and give them these... 26

Meanwhile, the process of discovery continued along the western African coast. Cape Bojador (1434) was the first milestone to be reached, and in completing this voyage Gil Eanes forever destroyed the notion that the seas beyond this Cape were unnavigable. Incremental progress down the coast culminated in reaching Rio do Ouro (1436), Cabo Branco (1441), Cape Verde (1444), and Red Cape (1445). Each geographical step redefined the limits of what Europeans considered the known world, and each new discovery helped Europeans close the gap between Prester John and themselves.

The death of Prince Henry the Navigator in 1460 deprived Europe of one of its most visionary leaders in terms of exploration and geopolitics, but the desire to link up with the fabled Prester John did not become extinguished with the passing of the Infante. While one of the most noteworthy promoters of the theory of an allied Christendom in the struggle against Islam, Henry was by no means alone in his beliefs. The European drive to join forces with the mythical priest-king continued well into the sixteenth century.

Another of Dom João’s sons, the Infante Dom Pedro, was the basis of a different sort of influence on late medieval and early modern European fascination with the Prester John legend. A body of literature sprang from diplomatic missions undertaken by Pedro, who resided with Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund in 1426-27. The Infante may have even served in an advisory capacity with the Emperor’s armies as they campaigned in

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This relatively unimportant embassy by a Portuguese prince, however, evolved into a fantastic epic entitled *El Libro del Infante Dom Pedro*, ascribed to Gómez de Santisteban. The earliest surviving copies of this popular book date to 1515, but the text absorbed European readers for well over a century.  

The real-life Infante Dom Pedro – who also possessed the title Duke of Coimbra - died in 1449 in a battle with forces of his intra-familial rival, his nephew King Afonso. The ignominious manner in which his corpse was disposed caused uproar around Europe, and Rogers suggested that the sympathy for the late Infante may have contributed to Pedro’s rise as a cultish figure. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (later Pope Pius II) began the process of glorifying Pedro in his 1449 treatise *On Illustrious Men*, recounting his “manliness” and “splendid deeds.” Hartman Schedel’s 1493 *Nuremberg Chronicle* carried the Pedro legend further, describing the Infante as “a prince of great reputation.” However, an elegiac poem attributed to Juan de Mena, which is dated 1490, escalated the praise of Pedro to lofty heights:

> Never before and never since has there been one to see the splendor and mysteries of the Orient…like you, Lord Prince. May this great manliness be sung among Moors and Jews. In the meantime, my verses will sing of your perfections among all three Gentiles.

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28 Ibid., 122.

29 Ibid., 62.

30 Ibid., 84.

31 Ibid., 85.

32 Ibid., 89.
Mena thus combined the elements of hero and traveler into the literary figure of the Infante Dom Pedro, a personage far removed from the mortal Duke of Coimbra. Santisteban’s text amplified the themes of the Mena poem and produced a character who visited many points in the Orient, not the least of which were “the land of India…the dominions of Prester John of the Indies, and India Major.” Mena’s hero-traveler evolved into the even more mythical and quasi-Arthurian Dom Pedro through the quill and ink of the Castilian Santisteban.

The mythical Dom Pedro and his twelve companions – the numerical reference to a certain messianic figure can hardly be coincidental – set out with one ultimate goal: to seek out the mighty Prester John. The text is relatively free from such trivialities as dates and the logistics of the supposed expedition, and has little value as a documentary source. The travelers somehow managed to cover the distance between Greece and Norway in a mere three days, according to Santisteban, and they accomplished this feat on the heavily laden backs of dromedaries. The narrative does, however, serve as a fascinating snapshot of the late medieval European mentalité with regard to geopolitics, ethnology, and gender norms.

En route to the lands of Prester John, Dom Pedro and his entourage stopped in the city of Sonterra, supposedly the capital city of the Amazons. This was “a province exclusively inhabited by Christian women subject to Prester John” who “do what comes naturally with men only three months in the year, namely March, April, and May.”

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33 Ibid., 125.
34 Ibid., 128.
35 Ibid., 143.
brave travelers, of course, manage to avoid sullylng their chaste reputations, and Santisteban claimed that the group protested, saying: “God forbid that we should ever be here for that action.”

A journey of a few days through Judea found the group reaching the Indies, arriving at the center of the realm of Prester John: the city of Alves. Santisteban claimed that Alves was “the best and noblest city that there is in the world, and in it there are more than nine hundred thousand inhabitants.” As Dom Pedro and his companions sat down for dinner with Prester John, they were not alone at the meal, for “fourteen kings ate at his table, and seven kings served his board.” The wealth of the priest-king was, according to Santisteban, quite evident, and he claimed that “the roof was of gold clusters and the floor was all precious stones and the surface of the table was all diamonds.”

Lest a reader place too much credence in Santisteban’s fantastic narrative, it is important to note some of the more implausible details he recorded. The travelers viewed pear trees, each of which “yields forty pears, and never more or less.” These pears represented the forty days of Lent, and were distributed by Prester John as a sort of sacramental fruit. The author also described a race of people called the Ponces, who were “the most Catholic Christians in the world, and they have but a single leg and a single foot, and, in the middle of the men’s bodies, the reproductive organ.”

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36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 146.
38 Ibid., 147.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 150.
41 Ibid., 148.
inhabitants of the kingdom of Prester John obtained meat and wool from “very small sheep that have eight feet and six horns each.”

While Santisteban may have never traveled farther than the local monastery, his narrative proved to be a popular sixteenth-century text. Rogers estimated that the book went through at least 111 editions, and the text appeared in a variety of languages. Though individual European explorers and their sponsors began to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the planet, the popularity of the Santisteban text demonstrates that the European appetite for a heroic Eastern ally was hardly whetted by the voyages of Columbus, Gama, and Magellan. The search for the kingdom of Prester John continued to be a primary motivation in the European voyages and travel literature of the sixteenth century. The next section of this chapter details some of the more significant examples of the continuing power of this legendary figure to spark the imagination of European minds.

The Intensified Portuguese Search for Prester John

The Portuguese voyages of exploration resumed with renewed vigor under the reign of King João II, who ruled from 1455 to 1495. One expedition, headed by Afonso de Aveiro, established a trading center at Benin, which is now a part of Nigeria. Rumors of a great monarch named King Ogané filtered their way down to the coastal outpost; it was said that this king lived a “twenty moons’ march” from the post. This mighty ruler commanded tribute from every regional chieftain, and purportedly placed his blessing

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., vii.
44 Silverberg, 199.
upon each new chief from behind a silk curtain. Accounts from Portuguese explorers –
based on information they gleaned from African sources - indicated that Ogané could
never be viewed by his subjects, and that he merely revealed to observers his foot from
behind the curtain at the end of a royal audience.  

Aveiro summarized these findings in a lengthy report to the court of Portuguese
King João II – the so-called “Prefect Prince” - and the similarities between the then-
current beliefs of the peculiarities of Prester John and certain characteristics of Ogané
were striking. Contemporaneous accounts from travelers who claimed to have been to
the land of Prester John recounted that the priest-king never showed himself to his
subjects, and silk curtains provided a concealing veil that shielded the monarch from the
eyes of court visitors. In addition, Portuguese accounts claimed that both rulers issued
silver crosses to supplicants with whom they had an audience. João Afonso de Aveiro,
who led the first Portuguese delegation to the King of Benin, described the coronation of
Benin monarchs by Ogané in the following passage that is suggestive of the legendary
Prester John:

As a sign of confirmation this Prince Ogané sent them a staff and a headpiece,
fashioned like a Spanish helmet, made all of shining brass, in place of a sceptre
and crown. He also sent a cross, of the same brass, and shaped like those worn by
the Commendadores, to be worn around the neck like something religious and
holy.  

Court geographers concluded that an eastward trip of 300 leagues from Benin
would place the traveler directly in the heart of the land of Abyssinia, which they then
suspected was the realm of Prester John. Thus, according to the advisors of João II, the

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46 Alvise Cà da Mosto, *The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents on Western Africa in
the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century. Translated and edited by G. R. Crone* (London: Hakluyt Society,
1937).
personages of King Ogané and Prester John must have been one and the same, and that it was incumbent upon the Portuguese to set out and locate the priest-king.

The renewed Portuguese efforts to find Prester John also involved investment in a new technology: a three-dimensional representation of the Earth. The Bohemian cartographer and navigator Martin Behaim (also known as Martin of Behaim) became attached to the court of Portuguese king João II after a short career in maritime trade. He gained royal attention as a pupil of the astronomer Regiomontanus (Johann Müller of Königsberg), and in 1480 Behaim found himself appointed to a navigational council chartered by Portugal’s “Perfect Prince.” As evidence of the high favor in which the king held Behaim, João II also knighted him in 1485. Behaim likely came into contact with the proposal by Columbus to sail west in order to reach the Indies, a scheme the Genovese sailor presented to João II in the summer of 1485. While the Portuguese crown decided against funding Columbus, there was certainly no reduction in interest in reaching the Indies and Prester John.

The Journeys of Pero da Covilhã and Afonso de Paiva

This steady belief in the location of the mythical potentate also led King João II to organize a diplomatic and intelligence mission to Abyssinia. Subrahmanyam described this “multi-pronged strategy” by João II as evidence that the monarch “hedged his bets” about the location of the kingdom of Prester John. Heading up this expedition were two members of the king’s entourage, Pero da Covilhã and Afonso de Paiva. Their goals

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48 Ibid.

were twofold: to discover a land route to the Indies, and to make contact with the kingdom of Prester John. The small expedition left Lisbon in 1487,\textsuperscript{50} sailing via Barcelona, Naples and Rhodes (where they masqueraded as Muslim traders), Covilhã and Paiva traveled to Alexandria, Cairo, El Tor (in Sinai), Suakin, and Aden, arriving in the port city in August 1488.\textsuperscript{51} The hedging of the bets described by Subrahmanyam also included a sea-based reconnaissance mission by Bartolomeu Dias, whose 1487-88 mission to pass the southern tip of the African continent was in large measure also one dedicated to contacting the elusive priest-king Prester John.\textsuperscript{52}

The Arabic-speaking Covilhã and Paiva\textsuperscript{53} parted company at Aden, with Covilhã bound for India and Paiva destined for the court of Prester John. Covilhã arrived at the port of Cannanore in the fall of 1488, and he proceeded to travel along the Malabar Coast in an attempt to gather as much information as possible about the spice trade. Included among his findings was such useful data as the prices of commodities, supply sources, and the nature of dealing with Arab and Hindu spice merchants. Covilhã apparently learned another important piece of information, as a trader informed him that there was a vast open sea beyond the southern tip of Africa.\textsuperscript{54}

In order to verify this piece of geographical information, Covilhã set out to explore the eastern coast of Africa. Traveling first to Ormuz, he negotiated his way onto


\textsuperscript{51} Silverberg, 203.

\textsuperscript{52} J.H. Parry, \textit{The Age of Reconnaissance} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 138.

\textsuperscript{53} Subrahmanyam, 46.

\textsuperscript{54} Parry, 138.
a ship that was headed down the Swahili coast. He made his way as far south as Sofala, a
port that is approximately two-thirds of the way down the eastern coast of Africa. At
Sofala, Covilhã observed the considerable commercial activity of the Arab traders, and
the contacts that he developed among these traders provided him with detailed
information about the trans-Cape voyage. Covilhã assembled his valuable findings
during his return trip north to Cairo.55

In Cairo, Covilhã learned that Paiva died after a considerable period of wandering
in northeastern Africa. It was not known if Paiva actually succeeded in making his way
to Abyssinia, or he made contact with Prester John. While in Cairo, Covilhã encountered
two Jewish envoys from João II, Josepe de Lamego and Rabbi Abraham de Beja.56

Covilhã sent a record of his discoveries back to the Portuguese king with Josepe. At this
point Covilhã decided to travel to Ethiopia himself, since there was no surviving record
of any Portuguese-Abyssinian contact, and his desire was to complete the mission
contracted to the two men.

Traveling now with Rabbi Abraham, Covilhã first returned to Ormuz, and then
sailed to Aden, whereupon Abraham was dispatched with more observations for João II.
Covilhã continued to Jeddah, and then traveled inland to Mecca with an apparent desire
to satisfy his curiosity about the Muslim holy city. After visiting St. Catherine's
monastery in the Sinai, he returned to Jeddah, and then passing to Aden, Zeila, and

55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 139.
Massawa. Covilhã continued inland to Ethiopia, finally arriving at the court of the king that he believed to be Prester John.\textsuperscript{57}

Pero da Covilhã thus became the first European to document a meeting with the legendary Prester John who, as it turns out, was actually named King Eskender. By surviving accounts Covilhã was well received by Eskender, and the king promised to send the Portuguese traveler back to his homeland with gifts for João II.\textsuperscript{58} The mission seemed complete, and Covilhã prepared to return to his homeland for what he undoubtedly believed to be a hero’s welcome, since he succeeded in finding and meeting the elusive Prester John.\textsuperscript{59}

King Eskender, however, died in 1494, leaving his numerous pledges to Covilhã unfilled. His successor, King Na’od, refused to allow Covilhã to leave the kingdom, claiming that Ethiopian customs did not allow such foreign visitors to ever depart. Covilhã thus remained a virtual prisoner in Ethiopia – albeit with a status as an honored dignitary - for the next thirty years of his life.\textsuperscript{60}

The kingdom of Prester John, in the Abyssinian location advocated by the Portuguese, was a far cry from the mythical land of opulence and splendor depicted in many European accounts. Ethiopia, while possessing a political, cultural, and religious heritage that stretched back to at least the third century BCE, was a comparatively poor outcropping of schismatic Christians whose potential as allies in the battle against Islam was rather limited. The expedition of Pero da Covilhã was thus both an apex – contact

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{60} Eric Axelson, “Prince Henry the Navigator and the Discovery of the Sea Route to India,” \textit{The Geographical Journal} 127:2 (Jun., 1961), 153.
had been made with Prester John – and a nadir, since the powerful potentate of European lore had turned out to be the relatively inconsequential feudal ruler of an isolated African highland region.

_Diogo Lopes de Sequeira_

The Portuguese explorer and administrator Diogo Lopes de Sequeira achieved his first fame leading the first documented European expedition to Malacca in 1509. After placing a pair of _padrões_ on the shores of the island of Sumatra to claim the island for the king of Portugal, Lopes de Sequeira and his ships departed for Malacca. Indigenous forces dealt Lopes de Sequeira a crushing defeat, with over 60 men killed, and he sailed back to Cochin with the remaining troops. The conquest of Malacca ultimately fell to Afonso de Albuquerque, who needed over 1200 men and eighteen ships to bring about the defeat of the Muslim forces holding the city.

Lopes de Sequeira, appointed “governor of these Indies” from 1518-22, later commanded a fleet that landed at the port of Massawa in 1520. He forwarded news of his efforts to complete an alliance with the Abyssinian king back to Lisbon. The letter is known as _Carta das novas que vierama el Rey nosso Senhor do descobrimento do Preste Joham_ (1521).[^61] A priest on the seven-year embassy also composed a highly influential book[^62] that became part of the standard canon on Prester John in the sixteenth century and beyond. It is at this point that much of the traditional literature on the legend of Prester John ends: the contact made between the Portuguese and the Ethiopian emperor.


However, we will see that the influence of the mythical priest-king continued far beyond the 1520 exchange of ambassadors.
Chapter Six
The Influence of the Prester John Legend in the Sixteenth Century

Historians often conclude discussions of the influence of the legend of Prester John with temporal assumptions about the when the myth ceased to be a driving force in European expansion. The myth, after all, had to end somewhere, and the typical historiographical conjecture usually brings the Prester John legend to a close after contact was definitively established between Portugal and Ethiopia. More importantly, though, the 1492 arrival of Columbus in the Americas often serves as a convenient point of demarcation between “medieval” perspectives and the “early modern” world for the general population (and even many scholars), and typically the post-Columbian historical narrative is bereft of any discussion of the legend of Prester John.

The traditional interpretation of the legend of Prester John suggests that European interest in Prester John precipitously declined in the early sixteenth century, but there are quite a few examples of the continued faith in the existence of Prester John that extend into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet for European explorers and their sponsors, the mere discovery of new lands by Columbus and other voyagers created more questions than the voyages themselves answered. Joachim Küpper’s thought-provoking essay\(^1\) on the intellectual challenges posed by the Columbian expeditions addressed the

“unproblematic attitude”\(^2\) exhibited by most Europeans in coming to terms with new lands, hitherto unknown flora and fauna, and the process of integrating an unprecedented amount of novel information with traditional views of the cosmos. Relevant to the present study, Küpper described a concurrent evolution in the legend of the powerful priest-king who long tantalized Europeans:

Still, if despite its being withheld from humans Paradise had a place on earth, it was likely that neighboring regions did to a certain extent participate in its paradisiacal nature. The whole idea [an earthly Paradise] became more concrete as the regions adjoining Paradise were linked to the realm of Prester John, the mythical Christian king in Central Asia first mentioned in the chronicle Otto of Freising finished in 1158...As time went by, the myth of Prester John merged with classical tradition of the Ethiopians as one of the happiest of nations, which in turn was supplemented with the Biblical story of the Queen of Sheba and contemporary knowledge of the Ethiopians being Christians. The whole complex of ideas led to a belief in the existence of a great Christian empire located in a vaguely delimited “East” comprising both India and Ethiopia. By placing the discoveries [of the Americas] in the neighborhood of that empire the chroniclers deprived them of their provocative nature – at least as long as one was prepared to accept them as (Nuevas) Indias in the literal sense.\(^3\)

The sudden awareness by Europeans of the Americas did not result in an immediate lifting of any metaphorical veil of classical geography, and European explorers continued to hold fast to traditional ideas about the nature of the world and its peoples. Peter Mancall noted that “few Europeans were eager to establish overseas colonies,” nor did information about the new continents “quickly reshape the way that Europeans looked at the world around them.”\(^4\) Yet gradually these beliefs and attitudes changed, including traditional views about the Christian priest-king Prester John. Some European writers and explorers continued to place great stock in the legend, others

\(^2\) Ibid., 364.

\(^3\) Ibid., 380.

acknowledged Prester John while diminishing his importance, while some Europeans exhibited a blending of the Prester John legend with “known” information about the Mongol khans, a phenomenon I describe as the “Prester-khan” legend. A survey of the prominent sixteenth century European travel writers and global explorers provides a significant amount of evidence about the endurance of the legend of Prester John, while simultaneously demonstrating the wide variety of perspectives that Europeans exhibited toward the existence and eminence of the mythical priest-king. This chapter surveys some of the sixteenth century European explorers and writers whose understanding of the world showed evidence of the continued influence of the Prester John legend. We begin with an individual to whom perhaps the greatest amount of literary and historical attention has been paid in the entire canon of writings on European expansion.

Cristóbal Colón

The 1992 quincentenary of the first voyage of Christopher Columbus brought with it a much-needed wave of historiographical reassessments of the Genovese explorer, and much of the literature was especially critical of Columbus. This of course in stark contrast with the welcome imagined by Samuel Eliot Morison for the 1892 commemoration of the first of the Columbian voyages, in which the author claimed that the “entire Western World joined in celebrating the four hundredth anniversary of 1492.”5 The high volume of historical works on Columbus that coincided with the

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quincentenary included a number of texts that reexamined the medieval influences on the worldview of Columbus.\(^6\)

Yet little attention has been paid by historians to the influence of the legend of Prester John on the development of the ideas held by Columbus about the world. This may in part be attributed to the fact that the main destination envisioned by Columbus was the so-called Island of Cipango, a corruption of the word “Japan.”\(^7\) Few versions of the legend of Prester John situated the mythical priest-king in close proximity to or in control of the Japanese islands, so it is not surprising that connections between Prester John and Christopher Columbus would be made by scholars.

Another difficulty in discerning the extent to which Christopher Columbus was influenced by the Prester John legend is that the explorer’s original journal has not survived. We are at least one generation removed from the original manuscript, and the best sources who used the original document are Ferdinand Colon, the son of Columbus who used the manuscript in preparing a 1571 biography of his father, and Bartolomé de las Casas, the Dominican friar who used the Columbus journal as source material for *Historia de las Indias*. Thus, modern historians are subject to the edits, summaries, and biases of two different sixteenth century writers when attempting to use the Journal as a source of information about Columbus.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) *Journal of Columbus*, 6 October 1492. Columbus derived the term *Cipango* (alternately spelled *Zipango*) directly from Marco Polo’s *Travels*.

There is another reason why historians have not inquired into the influence of the legendary Prester John on the thinking of Columbus, and it is simply this: the Journal of Columbus does not contain the words “Prester John.” Scholars should not be faulted for failing to find the presence of text that does not exist. However, there is more work involved in making a connection between Prester John and Columbus than simply scanning a printed translation of the Journal for keywords.

To understand how Columbus viewed the world, it is important to consider the books that influenced the Genovese explorer’s thinking. Morison noted that Marco Polo’s Travels and Mandeville’s Travels were among the texts that Columbus frequently referenced. Moseley observed that Behaim’s 1492 globe used many of the same sources as Columbus, and the Geographia of Ptolemy was among the most important works utilized by both men. Other works consulted and annotated by Columbus from his personal library included such texts as “Pliny the Elder’s Naturalis historia, Plutarch’s Lives…the Historia rerum ubique gestarum of Pius II, and Pierre d’Ailly’s Imago mundi.” Columbus, on the basis of the basis of the medieval and classical texts he consulted, clearly was a person heavily influenced by a worldview in which legend and fact are not easily separated.


9 Morison, Admiral, 243.

10 Moseley, “Behaim,” 89.

Columbus was also influenced by the writings of Florentine cosmographer and mathematician Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli, who provided Columbus in a pair of letters with a map and instructions for reaching the Spice Islands and other points in eastern Asia via a western sea route. Some historians suggest that Columbus carried the letters from Toscanelli with him on the first voyage while others do not make this assertion, but it is clear that Columbus preserved the letters, as both las Casas and Ferdinand Columbus had access to the Toscanelli missives. The letters provide information that is highly reminiscent of the rhetoric associated with the Prester John legend. Toscanelli wrote that “when that voyage shall be made it will be to powerful kingdoms and cities and most noble provinces, very rich in all manner of things in great abundance and very necessary to us, such as all sorts of spices in great quantity and jewels in greatest abundance.” The explorer who undertook the westward journey, noted Toscanelli, would meet “Kings and Princes who are very desirous, more than ourselves to have intercourse and speech with Christians of these our parts, because a great part of them are Christians.” This religious affiliation is most certainly in keeping with the Christianity of Prester John, as is Toscanelli’s claim that the island of Cipango “is most fertile in gold, pearls, and precious stones, “ and that the inhabitants “cover the temples with solid gold.”

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12 There is some disagreement among historians as to whether the Toscanelli letters were penned directly to Columbus or if the Genovese explorer simply had access to them via Fernão Martins, a friend of Toscanelli and an operative of Portuguese king Dom Afonso V. For a brief overview of the controversy, see W. G. L. Randles, “The Evaluation of Columbus' 'India' Project by Portuguese and Spanish Cosmographers in the Light of the Geographical Science of the Period,” *Imago Mundi* 42 (1990), 50-64.


14 Ibid., 11.

15 Ibid.
However, it is in the library of Columbus that the direct connection between
Prester John and the explorer can first be made. Columbus owned a 1477 edition of
Polo’s *Travels*, and the copy owned by Columbus is filled with the explorer’s annotations.
Among the running commentary left behind by Columbus in his copy of *Travels* are two
clear references to Prester John in his own handwriting.\(^{16}\) Both jottings refer to the island
Mandeville described as “Socotra,” and Columbus took seriously the presence believed to
be there of the enigmatic Prester John.\(^{17}\)

The diary entry made by Columbus in the Journal for October 21, 1492 includes a
reference to one of his stated goals. In the following passage, Columbus discussed the
nature of a particular duty proscribed to him by Ferdinand and Isabella:

> I intended to search the island until I had had speech with the king, and seen
whether he had the gold of which I had heard. I shall then shape a course for
another much larger island, which I believe to be Cipango, judging from the signs
made by the Indians I bring with me. They call it Cuba, and they say that there are
ships and many skilful sailors there. Beyond this island there is another called
Bosio, which they also say is very large, and others we shall see as we pass, lying
between. According as I obtain tidings of gold or spices I shall settle what should
be done. I am still resolved to go to the mainland and the city of Guisay[ in China],
and to deliver the letters of your Highnesses to the Gran Can, requesting a reply
and returning with it.\(^{18}\)

Columbus in the journal entry referred to the *Gran Can* (“great khan”), the
emperor he believed controlled Cathay (China) and Cipango (Japan). On the surface this
reference might simply be dismissed as an outdated allusion to the Mongol khans, who
ruled China during the Yuan Dynasty. However, given the considerable reliance by

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\(^{16}\) Rogers, *Eastern Christians*, 49.

\(^{17}\) The copy of Mandeville’s *Travels* owned by Columbus is now archived at the Columbian
Library of Seville. For a detailed analysis of the notations penned by Columbus in the books he owned, see
Cesare de Lollis, *Scritti di Cristoforo Colombo* (Rome: Raccolta di Documenti e Studi pubblicati dalla R.

\(^{18}\) Columbus, *Journal*, 21 October 1492.
Columbus upon Marco Polo’s *Travels*, we might also conjecture that this passage is an example of the “Prester-khan” hypothesis discussed earlier in this dissertation. It is indeed possible that Columbus considered the kingdom of Prester John to have been subsumed by (or in a state of subordination to) this imagined Empire of the *Gran Can*. Another passage from the *Journal* shares even more similarities to the lands believed to be controlled by Prester John:

> The Admiral says that all the people he has hitherto met with have very great fear of those of Caniba or Canima. They affirm that they live in the island of Bohio, which must be very large, according to all accounts. The Admiral understood that those of Caniba come to take people from their homes, the other] being very cowardly, and without knowledge of arms. For this cause it appears that these Indians do not settle on the sea-coast, owing to being near the land of Caniba. When the natives who were on board saw a course shaped for that land, they feared to speak, thinking they were going to be eaten; nor could they rid themselves of their fear. They declared that the Canibas had only one eye and dogs' faces. The Admiral thought they lied, and was inclined to believe that it was people from the dominions of the Gran Can who took them into captivity.19

The references to the “very large” island that the natives called Bohio can be directly traced to the letter of Toscanelli, who described Bohio as a thriving port in Cathay. Columbus in this excerpt seemed unsure if the island mentioned was indeed Bohio, or perhaps Cipango. Since the *Journal* is unclear on the subject, this might also have been the island of Socotra that Columbus believed was the home of Prester John. Interesting also in this passage are the references to the people with “one eye” and “dogs’ faces.” The *Journal* does not indicate the means by which Columbus interrogated the natives to obtain this information, but as discussed earlier in this dissertation, creatures such as the dog-faced *Cynocephali* and the one-eyed *Arimaspi* were frequently found in the medieval and classical literature with which Columbus was acquainted. Columbus believed that the long-sought terrestrial Paradise would necessarily be located in “precise

19 Columbus, *Journal*, 26 November 1492.
and perfect antipodal balance with Jerusalem." On his third voyage Columbus also speculated that he might have located this terrestrial paradise. One wonders if the inclusion of these fantastic creatures is an example of Columbus looking for – and finding evidence to support – the fantastic world he had been conditioned to believe was the world of the Three Indies.

When Columbus began his momentous 1492 voyage, he possessed a vague notion of traveling in a westerly direction to reach part of the fabled Indies. The Genovese explorer wrote of a Gran Can that he hoped to encounter, but he was likely to have believed that anything was possible in the Indies, even meeting the fabled Prester John. While determining the exact motivations and thoughts of Columbus is impossible, given the generation loss between sources and the fact that Columbus composed his Journal on the return trip, it is safe to say that the kingdom of Prester John was within the realm of possibilities Columbus must have considered as he figuratively and literally ventured into previously uncharted waters.

**Voyages of Vasco da Gama**

Unlike the previous example of Columbus, the study of the influence of Prester John on the expeditions of Vasco da Gama requires less effort to discern. The storied first voyage of Vasco da Gama to India from 1497-99 needs little rehashing in this study, and the oft-quoted aphorism attributed to Gama (“We came to seek Christians and spices”) underscores the multiple Portuguese motivations in overseas exploration,

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20 Delno West, “Christopher Columbus and His Enterprise to the Indies: Scholarship of the Last Quarter Century,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* Third Series, 49:2 (Apr., 1992), 263.


22 Subrahmanyam, 129.
expansion, and exploitation. While the Roteiro attributed to Gama is at least one degree of separation removed from the explorer’s hand, there seems to be little doubt that the document reflects at least the sentiments of Vasco da Gama and his patrons in Lisbon. Included in the religious motivations of Gama was a proscription by Manuel I of Portugal to make contact with Prester John.

The Roteiro depicting the first voyage of Vasco da Gama initially mentions the kingdom of Prester John as his Portuguese vessels reached what is modern day Mozambique. Gama learned from some Swahili merchants on the coast of Mozambique the possible location of Prester John. In the following passage from the Roteiro, Gama described the point at which he received clues as to the possibility of contact with the mighty Prester John’s kingdom:

We were told, moreover, that Prester John resided not far from this place; that he held many cities along the coast, and that the inhabitants of those cities were great merchants and owned big ships. The residence of Prester John was said to be far in the interior, and could be reached only on the back of camels. These Moors had also brought hither two Christian captives from India. This information, and many other things which we heard, rendered us so happy that we cried with joy, and prayed God to grant us health, so that we might behold what we so much desired.

It is impossible to determine from the narrative if the information provided to Gama had been correctly translated, or if the Muslim merchants in this Swahili Coast port simply passed along disinformation to confuse the Portuguese. However, the fact that the news of the a route to find Prester John made the Portuguese “so happy that we cried with joy” certainly implies that discovering more information about Prester John was quite

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24 Vasco da Gama, Roteiro, 24.
high on the list of priorities for Gama. After all, when a king commands a person to
deliver a royal missive, chances are that the person charged with carrying out such a duty
will diligently put forth the necessary effort to see through the proscribed diplomatic
mission to its completion.

The *Roteiro* described the allegedly perpetual state of war that existed between
the “Grand Sultan”\(^25\) of Egypt and Prester John. This ongoing conflict, of course, served
as a form of proof of the potential usefulness to European geopolitical aims that an
alliance with Prester John would no doubt support. The Grand Sultan, according to the
*Roteiro*, received “revenue of 600,000 cruzados in customs duties” from the trans-
shipment of Indian spices, and out of this sum he pays to a king called Cidadym an
annual subsidy of 100,000 cruzados for making war upon Prester John.”\(^26\)

Arriving in Calicut during monsoon season with the assistance of a pilot he
picked up in Malindi, Gama and his crews began their search for “Christians and
spices.”\(^27\) A Muslim from a trading ship came on board his vessel and told Gama that he
entered a land with “plenty of rubies, plenty of emeralds! You owe great thanks to God,
for having brought you to a country holding such riches!”\(^28\) Gama observed that the city
of Calicut “is inhabited by Christians,” and that some of these supposed co-religionists

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\(^{25}\) At the time of Gama’s first voyage this would be the he Circassian Mamluk Sultan of Egypt Az-
Zahir Qanshaw of the Burji Dynasty. For more information on the Ciscassian Mamluks, see Ayalon
69:3 (Jul. - Sep., 1949), 135-147.

\(^{26}\) Gama, *Roteiro*, 79. Ravenstein suggested that “Cidadym” is Sultan Muhammed ben Azhar ed-
din ben Ali ben Abu Bekr ben Sa’d ed din of Harar, who ruled this city in the African Horn from 1487 to
1520.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 48.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 49.
“clip their hair short or shave the head, merely allowing a tuft to remain on the crown as a
sign that they are Christians.”

Gama was pleased to discover what he assumed was a Christian church in Calicut,
noting that the “body of the church is as large as a monastery, all built of hewn stone and
covered with tiles. At the main entrance rises a pillar of bronze as high as a mast.”
Gama observed that within the “sanctuary stood a small image which they said
represented Our Lady.”

The group next encountered a religious ceremony in the temple
in which the priests “threw holy water over us, and gave us some white earth, which the
Christians of this country are in the habit of putting on their foreheads, breasts, around
the neck, and on the forearms.”

Summarizing the religious and geopolitical components of the Gama mission to
Calicut, the Roteiro noted that inhabitants of the “city of Chalichut they have some
knowledge of Prester John, but not much, as he is far away.”

Gama observed that the presumed Christians of Calicut “believe that Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary,
without sin, was crucified and killed by the Jews, and buried at Jerusalem.”

The inhabitants of Calicut, according to the Roteiro, “also have some knowledge of the Pope

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 52.
31 Ibid., 53. Ravenstein suggested that the image Gama interpreted as the Virgin Mary was
actually a Hindu depiction of Krishna and his mother Devaki.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 133.
34 Ibid.
of Rome, but know nothing of our faith beyond this. They [the people of Prester John] have letters and a written language.”  

Vasco da Gama returned home to accolades, having successfully navigated the waters around the Cape and having reached the Indian subcontinent. The people he assumed were Christians, of course, did not turn out to profess the faith he believed they possessed, but Gama did keep alive the legend of Prester John for future generations. Even after “discovering” information on the Swahili Coast about the kingdom of Prester John, Vasco da Gama interestingly kept asking people with whom he came into contact if they knew of the legendary priest-king. Perhaps this was doubt on his part, or perhaps Gama simply wanted to make sure that he fulfilled his obligations to the Portuguese king. Ultimately the voyages of Vasco da Gama added legitimacy to the reputation that this mythical potentate held in Europe, and his exploits likely helped fuel the imaginations of European writers as much as explorers and their sponsors.

Ludovico Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso

The legendary Prester John made an appearance in an influential early sixteenth century epic entitled Orlando Furioso (“Mad Roland”) penned by the Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto. The highly popular work itself is loosely based upon the twelfth century text Song of Roland, though the narrative had been considerably updated to include newer legends as well as the perfunctory passages dedicated to Ariosto’s patron, Ippolito d’Este, who was the duke of Ferrara.  

Though his story is a work of fiction, Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso serves as a gauge of popular knowledge about the kingdom of

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35 Ibid.

36 Guido Waldman, introduction and commentary to Orlando Furioso (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), xiii.
Prester John and the lure that it had for late medieval and early modern Europeans. Moreover, the epic was highly influential and later writers such as Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, and in particular John Milton drew from the themes developed by Ariosto in their own work.\(^{37}\)

Ariosto’s work introduces Prester John as a character named Senapo,\(^ {38}\) described as an emperor who “wields the Cross instead of a sceptre.”\(^ {39}\) The kingdom of this literary version of the mythical Prester John, according to Ariosto, “teems with people and cities and wealth, stretches from here [Nubia] to the mouth of the Red Sea.”\(^ {40}\) The vast riches of Prester John as described in *Orlando Furioso* far exceeded the comparatively meager wealth of any of his European contemporaries, which is in keeping with the general sixteenth century European understanding of the legendary priest-king. In the following passage, Ariosto provided readers with a tantalizing sketch of the dazzling court of Prester John:

> The castle in which the Ethiopian sovereign resided was in an opulence far in excess of its strength: the chains on the drawbridges and gates, every hinge and bolt from top to bottom, indeed everything for which we use iron, here was made of gold. Even though this finest metal was in such abundance, it was not disdained. The great loggias of the royal palace consisted of arcades in limpid

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37 For a thorough analysis of the extensive influence of Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* on Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, see James H. Sims, “Orlando Furioso in Milton: Heroic Flights and True Heroines,” *Comparative Literature* 49:2 (Spring, 1997), 128-150.

38 The choice of the name Senapo is something of a puzzle. The closest cognate seems to be the Italian word *senape*, which translates as “mustard.” Perhaps Ariosto intended to convey some sense of the skin color of Senapo, suggesting to readers that the emperor was less African in appearance. However, Rogers suggested that Senapo is a “deformation of the regnal name” of Ethiopian emperor Amda Seyon I, who ruled from 1314 to 1344. See *The Quest for Eastern Christians*, 107. Edward Ullendorf described Amda Seyon as “one of the most outstanding Ethiopian kings of any age and a singular figure dominating the Horn of Africa in the fourteenth century.” See Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time, A History of Ethiopia* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 63.

39 Ariosto, Canto 33.102.

40 Ibid.
crystal. Rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and topaz, spaced out proportionately, provided a glittering frieze of red and white, green, blue, and yellow beneath the fine ceilings.\footnote{Ibid., Canto 33.103-104.}

Ariosto’s Prester John was not merely a king of great personal wealth, though. The kingdom of Prester John depicted in \textit{Orlando Furioso} was a region containing products of significant interest to European merchants and their financiers, and Ariosto did not fail to provide enticing details of the commodities that could be obtained there. In the following passage, Ariosto presented readers with a glimpse at the commercial potential of the kingdom of Prester John:

Balsam originated here – Jerusalem never had remotely such an abundance. From here derives the musk that we import, and from here too the amber, sent to be bartered on other shores. From here, in fact, come the very things that are so costly in our own lands.\footnote{Ibid., Canto 33.104-105.}

Prester John, according to Ariosto, was a particularly powerful ruler, and the narrative notes that of “all the kings of Ethiopia there ever were, he was the richest and most powerful.”\footnote{Ibid., Canto 33.106. It should be noted here that “Ethiopia” was typically a term used by medieval Europeans for either sub-Saharan or sub-equatorial Africa, as well as unknown lands toward the eastern “Indies.” It was not limited to the Ethiopian highland regions.} The narrative of \textit{Orlando Furioso} indicates that even “the Sultan – the King of Egypt – pays tribute to [Prester John]."\footnote{Ibid.} One of the reasons for the geopolitical power of Prester John, according to Ariosto, was that the legendary priest-king possessed the ability “to divert the Nile from its natural course and flow in a new bed, thus exposing Cairo and its neighborhood to immediate famine.”\footnote{Ibid.} Yet Prester John was no mere paper
tiger hiding behind his authority and massive armies. Ariosto noted that Prester John “possessed more sinew than anyone else, and more courage.”

Ariosto included an interesting twist to his version of the Prester John legend, one that evoked the Greek myth of Phineas. The Prester John in Orlando Furioso had been punished by God for becoming “as proud as Lucifer” and for planning “war against his Creator.” Prester John’s haughtiness resulted in an unusual punishment that left him perpetually hungry. In the following excerpt Ariosto explained the process by which the cursed Prester John was tormented:

Every time the poor unfortunate was driven by dire necessity to eat or drink, at once a swarm of infernal avengers would appear – those obnoxious brutes, the harpies. With their predator’s snouts and talons they would scatter the dishes and snatch the food; and what their greedy bellies could not hold was left contaminated and befouled.

Fortunately for Senapo/Prester John, the curse would be lifted in the appearance of one Astolfo, who fulfilled a prophecy that only a knight on a winged horse could banish the harpies. Astolfo, who arrived in Ethiopia astride a hippogriff, successfully sent the harpies fleeing by blowing a magical horn, sealing them back in Hell and relieving Prester John of his plight. In gratitude Prester John agreed to provide his considerable armies to help Astolfo and the residents of Paris fend off an attack in the form of Muslim invaders. Prester John/Senapo also provided guidance to Astolfo in the art of training these Ethiopian and Nubian soldiers to fight the hated Saracens, and

46 Ibid., Canto 33.108.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., Canto 33.108.
49 The hippogriff is a mythical creature believed to be the offspring of a union between a mare and a griffin.
Ariosto noted that “the holy old man instructed him point-by-point.” Grateful for being saved from the harpies and also for receiving from Astolfo a special ointment that cured his blindness, Prester John “gave him not only the men he requested for his invasion of Bizerta [modern-day Tunisia], but fully a hundred thousand men more, and offered his own services into the bargain.” Astolfo and Prester John defeated the Muslims, and Europe was safe from invasion, at least for the time being.

The account of Prester John in Orlando Furioso contained quite a few elements of the legendary priest-king found in the Prester John letters and subsequent related literature that was discussed earlier in this dissertation. Prester John was first and foremost a stalwart Christian who could make a useful ally, and his tremendous armies could be molded into a potentially deadly flank against the Islamic world. The priest-king’s wealth far surpassed that of any European contemporary, and his lands produced many of the luxury goods that Europeans craved. Moreover, the kingdom of Prester John was in close proximity to the earthly Paradise that medieval Christians believed still existed somewhere in the distance. Though Orlando Furioso was on the surface an epic that ostensibly harkened back to the reign of Charlemagne, its inclusion of the legend of Prester John serves as evidence that Europeans still believed that the legendary Christian ruler existed somewhere in the Indies.

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50 Ariosto, Canto 38.25.
51 Ibid., Canto 28.27.
52 Ibid.
53 Astolfo visited the earthly Paradise in Canto 34.44-67.
Fernão de Magalhães

The circumnavigation of the globe by the expedition initially led by Fernão de Magalhães – better known to the English-speaking world as Ferdinand Magellan – was perhaps one of the earliest threats to the emerging Portuguese Empire. Indeed, contemporary Portuguese historian Damião de Góis, indicative of the intense anger expressed by many Portuguese over the decision by Magalhães to sail under a Spanish flag, described him as “a disgruntled man who planned the voyage for Castile principally to spite the Portuguese sovereign Manuel.”54 Like his Portuguese predecessors and contemporaries, though, Magalhães was influenced by the travel narratives of the late medieval period. In particular, Marco Polo’s Voyages seems to have been one of the texts likely consulted by Magalhães.

Unfortunately, few nautical documents survived the global expedition, nor have any journals, derroteros, or diaries that might have been kept by Magalhães turned up in the centuries after the voyage. The best source of information on the voyage is undoubtedly the account written by Antonio Pigafetta, who accompanied Magalhães and his crews for the duration of the trip. Another significant firsthand account of the expedition is the derrotero compiled by navigator Francisco Albo, but this text rarely deviates from compass headings and solar declinations.55 There is also an account by an unnamed Genoese pilot that contains a shorter narrative of the expedition, but which lacks many of the ethnographic and linguistic observations for which Pigafetta is

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54 Damião de Góis, Crónica do Felicíssimo Rei D. Manuel (Lisboa 1566–67; ²1619; Coimbra 1926), IV, 83-84.

55 See Francisco Albo, Semancas en un legajo suelto - A Derrotero or Log Book of the Voyage of Fernando Magallanes in Search of the Straït, from the Cape of St. Augustine, British Museum MS 17, 621.
renowned.\textsuperscript{56} It is the Pigafetta account that provides scholars with the most useful insights into the thinking of Magalhães, and Pigafetta’s rather detached manner – described by one historian as a matter-of-fact tendency to seemingly “take exotic peoples for granted”\textsuperscript{57} – makes him a highly reliable source of the first known global circumnavigation.\textsuperscript{58} Unfortunately, scholars are at least three degrees removed from the original thoughts of Magalhães. The processes of translation, transcribing, and editing the second-hand accounts of the voyage make difficult the work of discovering the influence of the legendary Prester John on Magalhães.

Antonio Pigafetta was a Venetian whose wealthy noble family lived in Vicenza, and the family later produced the geographical writers Marcantonio Pigafetta and Filippo Pigafetta.\textsuperscript{59} His early years remain obscure, but Pigafetta traveled to Spain in the company of Monsignor Cheregato, an ambassador of Pope Leo X.\textsuperscript{60} Pigafetta never published his account, though he managed to obtain a Venetian copyright for the work in 1523.\textsuperscript{61} The following passage details an example of the type of legendary figure

\textsuperscript{56} See Henry Edward John Stanley, introduction to \textit{The First Voyage Round the World} (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1874). Stanley included a translation from one of the three extant copies of the unnamed Genoese pilot. There is also a narrative of an unknown Portuguese writer in Giovanni Battista Ramusio's \textit{Navigations et viaggi} (1550).


\textsuperscript{58} I would be remiss in pointing out that Pigafetta also described such items of dubious veracity as Amazonian giants, people who sleep in their own ears, and pygmies in his account of the global circumnavigation, but the text remains otherwise free from the typical medieval monsters and other fanciful miscellanea.


Magalhães sought; this is more an example of the “Prester-khan” hybrid than the “real” Prester John:

Near this you find China the Great, the king of which is the greatest in all the world and is named Santhoa Raia. This king has seventy crowned kings under him....All the kings of Greater India and Upper India obey this king, and for a sign that they are his true vassals each of them has in the middle of his square a beast graved in marble, handsomer and bolder than a lion, and it is caled Cingha.  

The account by Pigafetta contains a curious passage that documents contact with a race of giants in modern-day Patagonia. What is especially interesting is that Pigafetta, a survivor of the expedition, claimed personal knowledge of this fantastic encounter. The first giant the group met, Pigafetta noted, was “so tall that the tallest of us only came up to his waist.” The Amazon-like race of giants, explained Pigafetta, did not possess a particularly advanced civilization, and he claimed that one giant was so in awe of the crew and ships that he “paised one finger upward, believing that we came from heaven.” This concept of monstrous races is certainly in keeping with similar traditions surrounding the Prester John legend, and this is also indicative of the continued influence of medieval and classical cosmography of Magalhães and his crew. Many members of the crew were familiar with the Travels of Sir John Mandeville, and there was at least one copy of the text on board the ships of the Magalhães expedition. Pigafetta also recorded that Magalhães made use of a map based on the 1492 Martin Behaim globe during the

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63 Pigafetta, 46.

64 Ibid.

65 Laurence Bergreen, *Over the Edge of the World* (New York: William Morrow, 2003), 81. Bergreen also wrote of the presence of copies of Marco Polo’s *Travels* on board the vessels.
expedition.\textsuperscript{66} This map, of course, prominently featured Prester John as a powerful monarch in the Indies.

Pigafetta recorded without comment another bizarre piece of information during the encounter with the Patagonian giants that is reminiscent of the sorts of monstrous creatures associated with the kingdom of Prester John. The interrogation of one of the giants revealed that in this region could be found “devils with two horns on their head, and with long hair down to their feet, and through their mouth and backside they belched fire.”\textsuperscript{67} Later in the journey Pigafetta recorded a conversation with a pilot in the Moluccas in which an especially bizarre race of people could be found:

[The pilot spoke of a people] on an island called Aruchete, where the men and women are no taller than a cubit and have ears so large that of one they make their bed and with the other they cover themselves. They are shaven and quite naked, and run swiftly, and have shrill and thin voices. They live in caves underground.\textsuperscript{68}

The meme of the so-called ear-sleepers dates back to at least the Alexandrine romances.\textsuperscript{69} It would be safe to suggest that the member of the crew of Magalhães (this may have been Pigafetta himself) who “heard” this story from the south Asian pilot merely placed the translated conversation into a context that immediately made sense, in this case a mythical sense. Far from being a man who “stood on the knife-edge dividing the ancient and medieval worlds from the modern,”\textsuperscript{70} Magellan was a late medieval

\textsuperscript{66} Pigafetta, 51.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 139.
\textsuperscript{69} It has been suggested that the ear-sleeper mythology may also have connections in the Indian subcontinent. See Bacil F. Kirtley, “The Ear-Sleepers: Some Permutations of a Traveler's Tale,” \textit{The Journal of American Folklore} 76:300 (Apr. - Jun., 1963), 119-130.
\textsuperscript{70} Bergreen, 84.
figure whose ideas reflected the classical and medieval influences in which he was steeped. It is certainly within the realm of possibility that among these influences was the legendary Prester John.

*Johannes Boemus: Omnium Gentium Mores, Leges et Ritus*

Among the most widely read and influential writers of the sixteenth century was Johannes Boemus, described in a 1611 English translation of his *Omnium Gentium Mores, Leges et Ritus* as a “sincere Historiographer.”\(^{71}\) A German humanist, Boemus developed a reputation as a leading Hebraist, and his writings show a tendency to hold in esteem classical sources.\(^{72}\) His writings also proved to be a significant influence on Sebastian Münster, author of *Cosmographia universalis* (briefly profiled later in this study), as well as influencing the 1674 map of Ferdinand Verbiest.\(^{73}\)

The 1520 text *Omnium Gentium Mores, Leges et Ritus* (“Manners and Customs of all Nations”) went through numerous editions in a number of languages, and the book remained in wide use throughout Europe for over a century.\(^{74}\) Richard Hakluyt incorporated large portions of the 1555 English translation by William Watreman – titled

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\(^{73}\) Hartmut Walravens, “Father Verbiest’s Chinese World Map (1674).” *Imago Mundi* 43 (1991), 34.

\(^{74}\) Richard G. Cole, “Sixteenth-Century Travel Books as a Source of European Attitudes toward Non-White and Non-Western Culture.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 116:1 (Feb. 15, 1972), 62. Another scholar noted that “Boemus appeared in no fewer than twenty-four impressions or editions in five languages. Eleven of these were in Latin, five in Italian, four in French, and three or more in English.” See Margaret T. Hodgen, “Montaigne and Shakespeare Again,” *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 16:1 (Nov., 1952), 33.
Far more than a mere collector of traveler’s fancies, Boemus was a highly regarded authority for knowledge about the world beyond the Mediterranean.

Boemus was clearly awed by the empire of Prester John, and he described the priest-king as being of “suche power, that he is reported to haue vndre him thre skore and two other kings.” The military might of Prester John, according to Boemus, was especially impressive, as the mythical ruler fielded an “army in the warres [of] ten hundred thousande men.” This million-man military force was supported by “fiue hundred Elephantes, and horses, and Cameles, a wonderfull number.” Though not a working priest himself, the Prester John imagined by Johannes Boemus was a ruler with all the prerogatives possessed by the Pope as well as all of the typical “maiestie of kings.” Boemus claimed that the kingdom of Prester John did not follow a set of written laws, since they had transcended this archaic legal system in favor of judgment “accordyng to reason and conscience.”

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75 “Fardle” is an alternate spelling for “fardel,” which is a term used to describe a bundle of items. “Facions” is an alternate spelling of “fashions.” See Johannes Boemus, *The Fardle of Facions, Containing the Aunciente Maners, Customes and Lawes, of the Peoples Enhabiting the Two Partes of the Earth, calle d Affricke and Asie. Translated by William Waterman* (London: By Ihon Kingstone and Henry Sutton, 1555. Amsterdam: facsimile by De Capo Press/Theatrvm Orbis Terrervm Ltd., 1970).

76 Richard Haklyut, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation: Made by Sea or Over-land to the Remote and Farthest Distant Quarters of the Earth at any Time within the Compass of these 1600 Yeares. Volumes I-10* (Glasgow : J. MacLehose and Sons, 1903-05).

77 Boemus, *Fardle of Facions*. The text, unfortunately, is not paginated.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.
Boemus provided readers with a highly detailed overview of the supposed religious structure of the kingdom of Prester John. He claimed that the “temples and churches ther, are muche larger, much richer, and more gorgeous then ours,” and that the ornate religious buildings in the kingdom of Prester John were “for the most part voulted from the floore to the toppe.”

The Christianity practiced by the subjects of Prester John, according to Boemus, used a structure of religious orders similar to those in western Europe, featuring groups that operated like “the ordre of S, Anthony, Dominique, Calaguritani, Augustines, and Machareanes.” After the worship of God and the Virgin Mary, observed Boemus, the subjects of Prester John held “moste in honour Thomas sirnamed Didimus.”

Boemus observed that Prester John was decidedly European in physical appearance, claiming that “he is not as the moste of the Ethiopians are, blacke, but white.” It is tempting to attribute this insistence on the whiteness of Prester John to be evidence of a growing sense of racial superiority among European thinkers in the sixteenth century, and as discussed in the chapter of this dissertation devoted to analyzing visual representations of Prester John, there was indeed a gradual darkening of the mythical priest-king’s skin tone as the seventeenth century progressed.

Johannes Boemus brought the discussion of the kingdom of Prester John to a higher level of erudition, at least by late fifteenth century standards. As a perceived

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82 Ibid.

83 Ibid. Perhaps the Mercedarians, the Roman Catholic order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy.

84 Ibid. Saint Thomas the Apostle, also known as Doubting Thomas. The listed surname is derived from the Greek word for “twin.” See John 11:16; 20:24; and 21:2, where this apostle is referred to as “Thomas, also called the Twin (Didymus).”

85 Ibid.
authoritative source, his inclusion of the legendary Prester John in the encyclopedic work *Omnium Gentium Mores, Leges et Ritus* helped solidify the mythical figure’s reputation into the seventeenth century.

**Duarte Lopes**

News of the exploits of the Portuguese in contacting the mythical priest-king did not rapidly filter out to Europe, however, and the myth of Prester John continued to tantalize the imaginations of European monarchs and adventurers. One such voyager was a priest named Duarte Lopes, who departed in 1578 on an expedition for the Spanish crown along the West and Central African coasts. His destination was the Kingdom of Congo, and he left “in a ship called the S. Antonio, belonging to an uncle of his, which was laden with various merchandise for that king.”

Part of his account records his dealings with the Congolese king, while other sections of the narrative discuss his fascination with the Prester John myth. The Filippo Pigafetta text relied upon information passed from Lopes to his Italian counterpart, which might have even included an original (lost) initial text that Lopes composed in Portuguese.

Lopes believed that Prester John’s kingdom was separated from that of the Congo by a “well populated country [that] extends for 150 miles” and that the kingdom was

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86 Boehrer, 403.


89 Ibid., 30.
bordered by the Congo, the Nile, and “the two lakes.” Interestingly, Lopes seemed to be describing the region of modern-day Uganda and Rwanda; perhaps British explorers Speke, Burton, and Stanley possessed the account of Lopes in their planning of expeditions to seek the source of the Nile River.

Figure 6.1 - Map by Münster (1540), *Africa XVIII Nova Tabula*. The Kingdom of Prester John (*Sedes Preste Iohan*) is noted with a capital city of “Hamarich” (this may be the present-day region of Hamar). This is the first European map to accurately provide a recognizable outline of the continent of Africa, although it contains medieval touches like the *monoculi* (Cyclops) drawn near the present-day Bight of Biafra.

The Italian translation of the Portuguese adventurer’s account appeared in 1591, and an English narrative based directly on the Lopes account appeared in 1597. Lopes steadfastly disputed the Ptolemaic notion of two African lakes on an east-west axis as the combined source of the mighty Nile River. In the following passage the author supplied an alternative theory on the waterways:

It is true that there are two lakes, but situated in quite a contrary direction to that of which Ptolemy writes; for he, as has been said, places his evidently from west

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90 Ibid.
to east, and those we now see lie almost in a direct line north and south, and nearly 400 miles apart.\textsuperscript{91}

There is a sober and detached quality to the text as it describes the social, economic, and political characteristics of the Kingdom of Congo, and the reader is likely to find this part of the work to be a solid source for early modern African history. The Lopes account becomes much more suspect as an accurate African historical source – although an ideal example of the power of the European desire to link up with an eastern ally - when the author broached the subject of the Kingdom of Prester John, whom he introduced as the “greatest and richest prince in all of Africa.”\textsuperscript{92} One might suspect that the author, while possessing relatively solid geographical knowledge of the continent, inserted snippets of folklore and earlier travel narratives in places where his direct knowledge may have been limited. Lopes next delved into a description that had its origin in one of the many versions of the Prester John legend, most likely some combination of Mandeville and one of the \textit{Letters of Prester John}; the following excerpt discussed the phenomenal wealth and power of the legendary priest-king:

In round numbers the empire of this Christian king has a circumference of about 4000 miles. The principal city, and where he chiefly resides and holds his Court, is called Belmalechi, and forms the seat of empire of many provinces, which are themselves ruled by kings. The territory is rich, and abounds in gold, silver, precious stones, and every kind of metal…courtiers and nobles are splendidly attired in silk robes, gold, and jewels…these people are to some extent Christians...\textsuperscript{93}

The Lopes narrative serves several purposes to modern historians, not the least of which is the extent to which the Prester John legend continued to fascinate European

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 129-30.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 128.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
monarchs, intellectuals, and explorers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. As ethnohistory or a summary of precolonial African states, Lopes’ *Report of the Kingdom of Congo and of the Surrounding Countries* is relatively worthless, given its obvious blend of fact and fiction, but the text has merit as a document that exhibits contemporary European beliefs about “the Indies” and “the East.” While the orthodox historiography on the Portuguese search for Prester John tends to describe this as a phenomenon that faded by the sixteenth century, the expedition of Lopes and its obsession with linking up with Prester John shows that many influential Portuguese figures continued to keep the legendary priest-king as a high priority into the seventeenth century.

**Richard Hakluyt the Younger**

James P. Helfers described *The Principall Navigations* as “the supreme chronicle of the English Renaissance age of discovery, and a new kind of literary document as well.”

Helfers offered the following assessment of Hakluyt’s motivations as a geographer and a writer on voyages of expedition:

At a basic emotional level, Hakluyt is motivated by his curiosity as a geographer; beyond that, he is moved by love for his country to redress a wrong of which he has become aware during his foreign sojourn. Later on he will disclaim all motivation from considerations of fame or profit: instead he pictures the process of collecting and translating these documents as monetarily profitless toil. But, he says, someone must undertake this necessary task of historical documentation. [while] patriotism is the overarching motivation behind the publication of these records.

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95 Helfers, 169-70.
Yet Hakluyt also demonstrated religious aims that mirrored those of Iberian explorers and their patrons. Helfers described the strong influence of traditional Christian religious beliefs on the development of Hakluyt’s worldview:

Hakluyt saw Scripture as both a source of inspiration for and a validation of his desire to study geography. As a man whose training and early occupation were the Christian ministry, this inspiration and validation must have been emotionally important. This emotional importance, however, only indirectly concerns the religious motive for exploration that Hakluyt mentions. This motivation has two aspects: first, the chance that exploration gives to bring pagans to Christianity, and second, a sense of the Providence of God at work in England's history.96

The sixteenth century editions of Hakluyt’s *Principall Navigations* routinely included the *Travels* of Sir John Mandeville as a component. Featured in the writings of Mandeville, of course, were fantastic descriptions of the kingdom of Prester John. Hakluyt maintained the inclusion of the Mandeville narrative through every edition until at least 1598.97 While it is tempting to suggest that Hakluyt removed the Mandeville material from later editions due to his growing doubts about its truthfulness, historians have no evidence for the editorial reasons behind the later omission of Sir John Mandeville from seventeenth century editions of *Principall Navigations*.98 The continued presence of Prester John in so many sixteenth and seventeenth geography and cosmography texts, however, makes the mythical priest-king difficult to dismiss as a medieval phenomenon. Perhaps no source is as compelling for the power of Prester John to influence European minds as was the work of a Dutch spy with access to the closely held secrets of the Estado da Índia.

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96 Ibid., 172.


98 Ibid. Helfers suggested that an equally plausible reason for the editorial decision may simply be related to the wide availability at the time of printed Mandeville texts.
Jan Huyghen van Linschoten

Jan Huyghen van Linschoten was a Dutch merchant and traveler who was appointed in 1583 as secretary to Dom Fray Vicente da Fonseca, the Archbishop of Goa. During the six years he spent in Goa Linschoten copied Portuguese maps, recorded trade information, and collected detailed sailing instructions to India, Southeast Asia, and China, as well as assembling somewhat less reliable information about Spanish possessions in the New World. Returning to the Netherlands after thirteen years in Portugal, the Azores, and the Indies, Linschoten composed an itinerary of his travels entitled the *Voyage ofte schipvaert van Jan Huyghen van Linschoten naar Oost ofte Portugaels Indien ... 1579-1592*, which incorporated all the intelligence he gleaned from the Portuguese, and this information eventually helped the English and the Dutch break the Portuguese monopoly on the Indian Ocean trade. John Wolfe, who published the first English edition of Linschoten’s *Voyages*, noted that the decision to issue the text was “not onely delightfull [sic], but also very commodious for our English Nation.”100 This edition of his *Voyage* was published in London in 1598, and the 1974 edition is a facsimile of the original English version.

Linschoten was as eager to believe in the myth of priest-king Prester John as any other early modern European traveler, and he located the realm in Abyssinia. His descriptions of the kingdom of the fabled Prester are nearly as fanciful as those of Sir John Mandeville, and they likely owe a significant debt to earlier writers like Marco Polo

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100 John Wolfe, in the introduction to Linschoten, Jan Huyghen van, *Voyages into ye East and West Indies (1598)* (Amsterdam: Walter J. Johnson, Inc. /Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, Ltd., 1974).
and Giovanni Battista Ramusio. In the following passage Linschoten began his
description of the kingdom of Prester John, which contains many elements that echo –
and even plagiarize – earlier travel accounts of the legendary priest-king:

Now to say something of Prester John, being the greatest and mightiest prince in all Africa, his country beginneth from the entrance into the red sea, and reacheth to the land of Siene… so that to set down the greatness of all the countries which this Christian king hath under his commandment, they are in compass 4000. Italian miles… his government is over many countries and kingdoms that are rich and abundant in gold and silver, and precious stones, and all sorts of metals…

What is especially intriguing about Linschoten’s inclusion of material that appears
to the modern eye quite far-fetched is that his voluminous text was otherwise a highly
reliable source of detailed information about Asian commerce, politics, and culture. The
presence in Linschoten’s text of such laudatory passages about this “highest, perfectest,
and excellentest” priest-king underscores the degree to which the Prester John legend
continued to exert influence well into the seventeenth century, as the observations of
Linschoten reached a wide English and Dutch audience in the first decades of the
existence of the VOC and the EIC. Linschoten’s text was perhaps the most vital
document to fall into the hands of Richard Hakluyt and other advocates for an English
version of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie. One study in particular lauded
Linschoten’s work for its lasting influence on Europeans and their understanding of the
globe:

Perhaps the most important volume, and the one that Hakluyt referred to most frequently during that meeting in 1601, was Jan Huygen van Linschoten’s Discours of voyages into ye Easte and West Indies (1598), originally published in


102 Ibid.
Dutch in Amsterdam in 1596. That volume provided more information about the East Indies than any other book available in England at the time, details about the peoples and commodities of the East (and notably of South Asia).  

Linschoten’s text served well the nascent Companies, the joint-stock corporations in states where Protestantism and mercantilism worked to create alternatives to the existing Iberian state monopolies. The English and Dutch not only sought the hefty profits they believed could be obtained from entering the trade network of the Indian Ocean, but they also sought what James A. Boon described as relationships with “reciprocal monarchs serving no pope.”  

Certainly Prester John fit this category, though the Coptic Christianity of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church would undoubtedly raise the metaphorical hackles of the likes of John Calvin and John Knox. Linschoten’s text brought “new” details about the legendary kingdom of Prester John to a wider audience in northwestern Europe, while providing the English and the Dutch with a wealth of information about Asia and Africa in a packaging a bit more appealing to Protestants. His work likely inspired a certain Archbishop of Canterbury to compose a similarly ambitious (though less wordy) work that compiled the expanding European knowledge of the globe.

*George Abbot: Description of the Whole Wolrde (1599)*

The legend of Prester John made one of its final appearances of the sixteenth century in a 1599 book composed by George Abbot, who would later become the Archbishop of Canterbury as well as the the fourth Chancellor of Trinity College in

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Dublin. This rather thin book follows a categorical approach, listing the regions and nations known to scholars in the late sixteenth century, and Abbot refrained from making claims to personal knowledge based on travel to any of the lands described. A modern historical geographer referred to Abbot’s *Description of the Whole Wolrde* as “forerunner of the dreary geographies which held the field in English schools right down to the twentieth century,” but setting these criticisms aside, this sparse summary of geographical knowledge is useful in gauging the state of European knowledge of the world at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The text appears to have reached a significant English-speaking audience, as it went through at least nine editions, the last of which was published in 1664.

Abbot described Prester John as a “a prince absolute,” and that he also had “a priestlike, or patriarchall functió, & iurisdiction among [the Abyssinians].” In Abbot’s estimation, Prester John was a “verie mightie prince, & reputed to be one of the greatest Emperors of the world.” Ever keen to understand the true religious persuasion of his subjects, the Anglican cleric assured readers that Prester John “in no sorte acknowledge[ed] any supreame prerogatiue of the B. of Rome.”

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107 Ibid.

108 Abbot, George. *Briefe Description of the Whole Worlde* (London: Printed by T. Iudson, for John Browne, and are to be sould at the signe of the Bible in Fleete-Streete, 1599. Facsimile printed at Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1970).

109 Ibid.
information was likely quite important to English readers, given their own recent history of estrangement with the Vatican.

Abbot noted that visitors to the kingdom of Prester John would find the fabled Mountains of the Moon, which he considered to be the source of the Nile River. This belief is typical for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the search for the Mountains of the Moon would continue into the nineteenth century with the expedition of John Hanning Speke and Richard Burton to reach the southern shores of Lake Victoria. Abbot also claimed that Prester John was able to extort a sizeable tribute through innovative water management techniques; in the following passage Abbot briefly explained the supposed history of Prester John’s manipulation of the flow of the Nile River:

The Princes of Ægipt have paid vnto the gouernor of the Abisines, a great tribute time out of mind: which of late, the great Turke supposing to be a custome needelesse, did deny: till the people of the Abisines by commandment of their Prince did breake downe their dammes: and drowning Egipt, did intórce the Turke to continue his pay, and to giue much money for the new making of them very earnestily, to his great charge, desiring a peace.\textsuperscript{110}

The works of Abbot and his late sixteenth century contemporaries in the field of geography continued to influence Europeans into the seventeenth century and beyond. Despite the growing body of knowledge from European explorers, merchants, and colonial officials, there continued to exist in the minds of many Europeans a distinct fascination with the fantastic kingdom of a distant Christian priest-king, and even the mounting lack of direct evidence related to Prester John’s kingdom could shake this entrenched belief. In the next chapter of this dissertation we will examine the continued

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
influence of the legendary Prester John on European thought in the seventeenth century and beyond.
Chapter Seven
Prester John in the Seventeenth Century and Beyond

The collective disappointment – or perhaps at least a sense of anticlimactic resignation – that may have been experienced by some Europeans toward Ethiopia as the center of the Prester John legend may have caused some travelers to call for the re-igniting of the search for the mythical priest-king. It is also possible that the nascent racism of Western Europeans used to justify the growing transatlantic slave trade made the idea that Prester John was an African incongruent with that of European ideas of an “inferior” African race. After all, how could such a powerful monarch possibly be of African origin, people who did not possess the qualities that Europeans were beginning to believe as essential characteristics for civilization? Bartels suggested that - at least for the English - race played a role in the gradual loss of gravitational pull that Prester John exerted:

English discourse was, of course, already filled with stereotypes of Africans as embodiments of evil, blackened by sin, driven by lust, and hungry for murder and revenge. Such images were augmented by an othering of another sort-by idealizations of a Christian Ethiopia, headed by a Prester John figure. Yet these impressions had an obvious imaginative edge. Prester John, for example, had been around for far too many centuries to be real. Too, the terms of the negative stereotypes were commonly applied to such a broad range of Others-from Africans to black magicians to sodomites to Jews-that their validity had to be suspect. And it seems no coincidence that the most popular targets of both positive and negative stereotyping were the Ethiopians, a people whom the English for decades knew only from texts, not from experience. Such
representations formed part of a discourse that, however much it might be "anxiously repeated," could never fully mask its imaginative outlines.¹

From the late sixteenth century forward, European characterizations of Prester John tended to fall into four categories: a) Prester John was an Ethiopian, and earlier claims of his tremendous kingdom were overstated; b) Prester John never existed, and was merely a figure of fantasy; c) Prester John’s kingdom was yet to be discovered in Asia, and the Portuguese linking of Abyssinia with Prester John was erroneous; and d) Prester John was really the emperor of China.

It should not be surprising to modern observers that the Prester John legend continued to exert influence in the seventeenth century and beyond. Rudolf Wittkower, who examined the general phenomenon of Europeans steadfastly holding on to many such “Marvels of the East”² up until the nineteenth century, offered the following informative explanation for the endurance of otherwise unbelievable legends in an era of increasing rationalism and scientific discovery:

[Medieval legends] made their way into natural science and geography, encyclopedias and cosmographies, romances and history, into maps, miniatures and sculpture. They gradually became stock features of the occidental mentality, and reappear peculiarly transformed in many different guises. And their power of survival was such that they did not die altogether with the geographical discoveries and a better knowledge of the East, but lived on in pseudo-scientific dress...³

Indeed, one of the most important effects of the various European Renaissance and Enlightenment movements was the resurgence in interest in classical writers. The ancient Greco-Roman texts rediscovered and reinterpreted - beginning with the Italian


³ Ibid.
humanists and continuing well into the nineteenth century - found audiences desirous of supposedly “lost” wisdom that the ancients once possessed. Since many aspects of the Prester John legend meshed well with classical traditions, perhaps we should question not why the mythical priest-king captivated European minds for so long, but rather why classics-infatuated Europeans discarded the legend of Prester John so soon.

The Jesuit Relation of Father Fernão Guerreiro

An excellent source for Portuguese religious activities in Africa and Asia are the writings of Father Fernão Guerreiro, a Jesuit missionary, and Guerreiro offered a different view of the kingdom of Prester John. In his 1605 relation of the travels of Benedict Goes in the Far East, dismissed Ethiopia as the site of the great priest-king. Guerreiro summed up as “common error” the placing of Prester John in Ethiopia, and ascribed this error to the eagerness of Portuguese emissaries to Ethiopia, who – upon finding “both Christians and crosses” - came to the conclusion that “this was none other than Preste Ioam.”

Guerreiro steadfastly believed that the real Prester John was “the Emperor of Catayo [China].” This can be, in part, attributed to the relative lack of wealth found by the Portuguese in Ethiopia: certainly the comparatively modest opulence of the Negus Negusti did not match the impossibly immense fortune described by previous accounts of

This is an Anglicization; the Portuguese rendering of the Jesuit’s name is Bento de Goges.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.
the legendary priest-king Prester John. This blending of the legend of Prester John with more factual information about a variety of Mongol leaders like Genghis Khan appeared in the accounts of quite a few European explorers, including as noted earlier in those of Columbus and Magellan. This “blended” character, which we earlier described as “Prester-khan,” integrated many of the salient features of the legendary Prester John – such as presiding over many dozens of lesser kings and possessing wealth far beyond the scope of contemporary European monarchs – with the “known” qualities of the Mongol khans. For Father Guerreiro, the kingdom of Prester John could be no place but in Cathay. In the following passage, Guerreiro made his case for the kingdom of Prester John to be relocated back to a center in eastern Asia:

For it is known that when the King of Catayo goes on horseback, he has carried before him three crosses, the first of gold, the second of silver, and the third of some other metal. His name is Ionas. He has authority over all both in spiritual and in temporal matters.⁹

Guerreiro argued that the conversion of the people of “Catayo” was due to the efforts of the “blessed apostle St. Thomas.”¹⁰ However, unlike earlier versions of the legend of St. Thomas in the Indies, Guerreiro said that “some of his disciples went there to preach the holy Gospel,”¹¹ since Thomas never visited these lands. Guerreiro seemed to recognize that his statements about Prester John contradicted contemporary European beliefs about the priest-king: “this belief [in an Ethiopian home for Prester John] has been current throughout Europe, though, as it appears, the real Preste Ioam is the Emperor of

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⁹ Guerreiro, 126.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.
Catayo.” Guerreiro is representative of a seventeenth century trend among some Europeans in which the kingdom of Prester John needed to be relocated once again to eastern Asia. This is a refrain that would also be espoused by such travelers as Philippe Avril, who is profiled later in this chapter. However, many European writers and cartographers continued to place Prester John in the center of the African continent, including an Anglican church official who sought to produce a comprehensive geographical encyclopedia.

*Samuel Purchas and his Pilgrimes*

Born in Essex in 1575, Purchas served as chaplain for a period of time to Archbishop George Abbot, whose *Geography* was profiled in the previous chapter of this dissertation. Unlike Abbot, though, the ecclesiastical geographer Purchas was not satisfied with merely providing a brief description for the places that he profiled in his four-volume *Purchas his Pilgrimes*. This highly influential text went through many editions, and King James I of England reportedly read through the work seven times.

One historical geographer offered up high praise for the historical approach used by Purchas, whatever his limits might have been as a skeptical thinker:

> [Purchas] was not limited to his reading of Hakluyt and Ramusii: he was familiar with every geographical writer of any note, English or foreign, of the sixteenth century, besides those of classical times, and for every statement that he made gave a careful reference to his source.

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12 Ibid., 127.

13 As a sign of affection – not to mention the intellectual influence of his mentor - Purchas dedicated his *Pilgrimes* series to Abbot.


15 Ibid., 537. Purchas is more likely to be criticized for his editing than for his lack of skepticism. See Richard Hitchcock, “Samuel Purchas as Editor: A Case Study: Anthony Knyvet’s Journal,” *The Modern Language Review* 99: 2 (Apr., 2004), 301-312 and also James P. Helfers, “The Explorer or the
This highly popular text continued to drive European interest in the legendary Prester John even as sixteenth and seventeenth century explorers and missionaries slowly added to the collective pool of empirical knowledge about the world. In particular the writings of Purchas tantalized generations of English readers, no doubt providing some additional influence on the citizens of Europe’s latest would-be colonial power. Taylor noted that Purchas “contributed to geography a useful compilation that took a form which appealed to the public of the seventeenth century, however repellent it may appear to the captious critic of the twentieth.” More importantly, writers such as Purchas served as authoritative pedagogical sources, and even though documents such as Purchas his Pilgrimes might be dismissed by some modern scholars as rife with myth and fantasy, it is important to remember that in the late medieval and early modern eras these sorts of books were used in institutions of higher learning to teach the next generations of future leaders. The high demand for a text such as Purchas his Pilgrimes reflects in large measure the esteem with which seventeenth century educators held Samuel Purchas as an authoritative expert.

Purchas provided readers with an account from Portuguese explorer Juan de Castro, who served as a captain in the Estado da Índia who served under Estêvão da Gama, the second son of Vasco da Gama. Castro’s account noted that the kingdom of Prester John was an especially powerful African nation, and he argued that “Preste John, which by another name, is called The King of the Abexi, is Lord of all the Land of

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16 Ibid., 539.
Æhiopia sub Ægypto: which is one of the greatest Provinces we know in the World."\[^{17}\]

The kingdom of Prester John as described in *Purchas his Pilgrimes* stretched from Nubia in the north to “that part where the Kingdome and Land of Manicongo lyeth,” and cutting across the African continent “behind the Springs and Lakes of Nilus, going through the fierie and unknowne Countries.”\[^{18}\]

Purchas included a detailed map of the boundaries of the kingdom of Prester John in the volume containing his Abyssinian narrative. The map is typical for the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century in that it depicts Prester John’s realm as encompassing approximately one-third of the African continent. This is not surprising, since Purchas copied many of the maps from the prominent cartographers of his time period. In particular, Purchas seemed to have a preference for the maps of Flemish mapmaker Jodocus Hondius, whose cartographical illustrations appear to be the original source for the maps in *Purchas his Pilgrimes.*\[^{19}\]

Another feature of the legendary kingdom of Prester John that Purchas incorporated into *Pilgrimes* was the idea that Abyssinia also marked the location of the lost earthly Paradise. Purchas suggested that the site of Paradise might be a certain “hill Amara…is situate as the nauil of that Ethiopian body, and center of their Empire, vnder the Equinoctiall line.”\[^{20}\] The reason why this site might be appropriate to locate Paradise,

\[^{17}\] Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes. Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and others (Volume VII)* (Glasgow: James McLehose and Sons, 1906), 249.

\[^{18}\] Ibid., 250.

\[^{19}\] William Foster, “Purchas and His ‘Pilgrimes,’” *The Geographical Journal* 68:3 (Sep., 1926), 197.

argued Purchas, was that this was “where the Sun may take his best view thereof, as not encountering in all his long iourny with the like Theatre, wherein the Graces & Muses are actors, no place more graced with Natures store?” Yet this earthly Paradise had an unexpected downside for its royal inhabitants, as Purchas explained in the following passage:

Once, Heauen and Earth, Nature and Industrie, have all been corriuals to it, all presenting their best presents, to make it of this so louely presence, some taking this for the place of our Forefathers Paradise. And yet though thus admired of others, as a Paradise, it is made a Prison to some [the descendants of Prester John, the Abyssinian princes], on whom Nature had bestowed the greatest freedome.

While modern critics might point out that Purchas never traveled to most of the places about which he wrote – especially not the kingdom of Prester John – this fact is immaterial to the discussion in this dissertation. What matters with regard to the relevance of Samuel Purchas is not the veracity of his writings, but rather the manner in which his commentary about Prester John was received. *Purchas his Pilgrimes* continued to fan the metaphorical flames of the mythology surrounding the mysterious Prester John, and historiographical assumptions about the so-called Age of Rationalism have to be tempered with the knowledge that – for many Europeans – the intellectual norms of the seventeenth century were not much different from those of the preceding centuries. Legendary characters such as Prester John and mythical places such as an earthly Paradise were still in vogue among seventeenth century European thinkers, and another contemporaneous English writer drew heavily on the legendary kingdom of Prester John developed by Purchas.

\[21\] Ibid.

\[22\] Ibid.
Milton’s Paradise and the Kingdom of Prester John

The seventeenth century epic poem *Paradise Lost* by the English writer John Milton is itself the source of centuries of careful study, and a summary of the text is not necessary for the purposes of this dissertation. However, two intertwined themes exhibited by Milton in the poem – the legendary Prester John and the proximity of earthly Paradise to Abyssinia – merit further scrutiny in a discussion of the influence of Prester John in the seventeenth century.

Milton, in describing Adam’s vision of his descendents and the nations in which they would live, alluded to the power of the kingdom of Prester John in the following passage:

Nor did his eyes not ken
Th’ empire of Negus, to his utmost port,
Ercoco, and the less maritime kings,
Mombaza and Quiloa and Melind.  

The excerpt suggests that Prester John – in his Ethiopian form as *Negus nagast* (“Lord of lords”) – continued to exercise dominion over wide swaths of the African continent. This is consistent with late medieval and early modern beliefs in the perceived power of Prester John over sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, the 1633 closing of Ethiopia’s borders to Europeans after the expulsion of the Jesuits by the emperor Fasilides meant that writers desirous of information about the kingdom of Prester John had to rely on older documents. In the case of Milton, it was to the writings of Samuel Purchas and the *Pilgrimes* volumes to which the poet turned.


24 There is a considerable body of research on Milton’s reliance upon *Purchas his Pilgrimes* for geographical material. See especially Robert A. Bryan, “Adam’s Tragic Vision in ‘Paradise Lost,’” *Studies*
In the same fashion as Purchas, Milton intimated that the earthly Paradise could be found in Abyssinia. Milton also continued to follow the traditional view that the source of the Nile River could be found in the kingdom of Prester John. In the following passage, Milton’s depiction of earthly Paradise bears a striking similarity to the “Hill Amara” found in *Purchas his Pilgrimes*:

Nor, where Abassin kings their issue guard,  
Mount Amara (though this by some suppos'd  
True Paradise) under the Ethiop line  
By Nilus' head, enclos'd with shining rock,  
A whole day's journey high, but wide remote  
From this Assyrian garden where the Fiend  
Saw undelighted all delight, all kind  
Of living creatures, new to sight and strange.\(^{25}\)

The longing for an earthly Paradise, as discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, has a lengthy literary tradition among western Christians as well as classical writers with the Elysian Fields and Blessed Isles of Greek and Roman traditions. Certainly Milton’s *Paradise Lost* reflects this human desire to reconnect with an idyllic past, this deep yearning for a return to the peace and wholesomeness of the Garden of Eden. Yet Milton’s linking of the kingdom of Prester John with earthly Paradise might also be an example of the medieval and Renaissance trope of the *locus amoenus*.\(^{26}\)

Perhaps in the chaotic milieu during which Milton composed *Paradise Lost* – the English Civil War, the Great Plague, and the Great Fire of London all occurred around the time of

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\(^{25}\) Milton, Book IV, 280-287.

\(^{26}\) Literally “peaceful place.” Typically the *locus amoenus* was a quiet, safe haven where beleaguered protagonists might find refuge from their worldly terrors. Such a place was often depicted as a peaceful space of green grass in the middle of a wooded area, perhaps with a pond or waterfall nearby, and occasionally such a *locus amoenus* also served as the setting for amorous activities. See Catherine A. M. Clarke, *Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700-1400* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 36.
the epic poem’s creation – the author viewed the kingdom of Prester John as a potential path by which God-fearing Christians might reconnect with the land of their spiritual birthright.

The association of mythical creatures with the kingdom of Prester John was long a staple of the travel literature related to the priest-king. Among the fantastic animals that appeared in some versions of the Prester John legend was the phoenix. Milton seems to have been aware of the connection between the realm of Prester John and the presence of the phoenix. In the following passage, Milton used the mythical bird as a metaphor for the angel Raphael, and the flying angel cruised over Ethiopia on his way to warn Adam of the pitfalls that await him should he eat from the Tree of Knowledge:

Of Towring Eagles, to all the Fowles he seems
A Phoenix, gaz’d by all, as that sole Bird
When to enshrine his reliques in the Sun`s
Bright Temple, to Aegyptian Theb`s he flies.
At once on th’ Eastern cliff of Paradise.27

Milton’s allusions to the kingdom of Prester John can easily be dismissed at first glance as mere plot devices. However, what is more important to the discussion at hand is not the extent to which Milton believed in the continued relevance of the kingdom of Prester John, but rather his role in perpetuating the myth. The inclusion in such an influential text as *Paradise Lost* of material related to the legendary Prester John and his kingdom helped sustain the mythical figure beyond the years typically considered to be his figurative death in the traditional historiography. In addition, the inclusion of the kingdom of Prester John in *Paradise Lost* influenced later epic works based on the priest-

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king, such as Samuel Johnson’s *The History of Rasselas: Prince of Abissinia* (1759), Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* (1816), and James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* (1933).

*Peter Helyn – Cosmographie (1652)*

The English ecclesiastic Peter Heylyn’s 1652 *Cosmographie* represented yet another attempt by a European author to produce a comprehensive work that described the known world. Heylyn was a fellow and lecturer at Magdalen College of Oxford, and his first foray into geography was the 1621 *Microcosmus* (“a little description of the great world”).

A staunch Anglican and Royalist, Heylyn transitioned from the field of divinity in 1647 near the end of the English Civil War.

Heylyn profiled Prester John in the *Cosmographie*, and his account does not offer much in the way of evidence contradicting contemporary accounts of a powerful African potentate. Heylyn did express skepticism at the dual role of Prester John as both a priest and a king. We might speculate that the staunch anti-Catholicism of such a devout Anglican injected itself into the possibility of the blending of temporal and spiritual offices as represented by the traditional views of Prester John. At any rate Heylyn offered the following explanation of the manner by which Prester John obtained his legendary dual title:

> And yet I more incline to those, who finding that the word *Prestegan* signifieth an *Apostle*, in the *Persian* tongue, and *Prestigani*, and Apostolical man: do thereupon infer that the title of *Padescha Prestigiani*, and *Apostolick King*, was given unto him for the *Orthodoxie* of his belief, which not being understood by some, instead of *Preste-gian*, they have made *Priest-John*, in *Latine Presbyter Johannes*; as by a like mistake, one *Pregent* (or *Prægian* as the French pronounce it) commander of

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some Gallies under Lewis the 12, was by the English of those times called Prior John.  

Heylyn observed that “Prestegian then, not Priest-John, is his proper adjunct” and that this was “contractedly, but commonly called the Prete by the Modern French who usually leave out an S before a consonant.” Heylyn added that many Europeans “more probably conceive, that this vulgar name of Prester-John, is but a corruption or a mistake for Precious John; and that the word Prete (by which his subjects call him) importeth no less.”

We might perceive of Heylyn’s Cosmographie as something of a significant breaking point in European perceptions about the mythical kingdom of Prester John. Though some writers had previously cast doubt on the existence of the legendary priest-king, or had begun the process of minimizing the size of Prester John’s kingdom, the Cosmographie of Heylyn directly challenged the orthodoxy of the myth of a dual-role leader. Prester John, according to Heylyn, possessed no spiritual authority beyond a nominal title that was a reward for piety. Yet even the presence of texts such as Heylyn’s could not reduce the lingering influence of the mythical kingdom of Prester John, which continued to fascinate European minds into the eighteenth century and beyond. Nor could the gradually weakening myth deter European travelers in Asia and Africa from

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30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.
attempting to come to terms with the dissonance between their belief in a legendary figure and the world that they saw firsthand abroad.

*Phillipe Avril: A Seventeenth-Century Jesuit in Search of Prester John*

As the seventeenth century wound down, there was no shortage of Europeans for whom the legend of Prester John maintained significance. One of these writers was Philippe Avril, a Jesuit priest dispatched by the Catholic Church to eastern Asia in search of safe travel routes.\footnote{Ronald S. Love, “A Passage to China: A French Jesuit's Perceptions of Siberia in the 1680s.” *French Colonial History* 3 (2003), 86.} Formerly a professor of philosophy and mathematics in Paris, Avril’s mission somewhat mirrored those of other French travelers commissioned by the government of Louis XIV to explore alternate routes through the land of “Grand Tartary.”\footnote{The English translator of Avril’s account claimed that the expedition was “undertaken by the French King’s order to discover a new way by land into China.” See frontispiece of Philippe Avril, S.J., *Travels into divers parts of Europe and Asia...* (London: T. Goodwin, 1693).}

Avril left Paris in the fall of 1684, and his eastward path wound through Syria, Kurdistan, and Persia before running into bureaucratic snags dealing with suspicious Russian officials.\footnote{Love, 94.} Ordered to leave Russia, Avril and his companion – fellow Jesuit Louis Barnabé – next tried to arrange a trip to China via a more southerly route, but he was arrested by the Ottomans as a suspected spy and jailed for several weeks in 1688.\footnote{Ibid., 97.} Avril returned to Paris in 1689, and the French language account of his journey was published three years later.

Despite the fact that Avril failed to complete his journey to China, the Jesuit priest successfully brought back to the West word of practical land routes to eastern Asia.
Moreover, Avril’s account filled in significant gaps in the collective European knowledge of eastern Asia. Ronald S. Love argued that Avril’s *Travels* added “tremendously to geographic knowledge of a part of the globe that was hitherto a mystery to western Europeans.” Certainly Avril’s on-the-ground commentaries and observations provided the West with more precise information about lands that previously were little more than imagined spaces in the minds of western Europeans.

One might expect that Philippe Avril – an educated Jesuit scholar living in late seventeenth-century Paris on the eve of the French Enlightenment – would be a person unlikely to promote the legend of Prester John in his narrative. After all, this is a highly factual and detailed text that brought a wealth of useful information about eastern Asia to a wide European audience. However, Avril devoted nearly a dozen pages to his understanding of the legend and the ways in which previous writers failed to make connections that were, in his eyes, quite obvious. According to Avril, European readers should know “that the Dalaè-lama is the same famous Preste-Jean, concerning whom Historians have written so variously.”

The location of Prester John in the lands of Tibet was a matter of common sense, argued Avril, since it was “more natural to acknowledge him in this Country of Asia, where he has always been, then to seek him out in Habyssinia, where he never was.”

Avril described the Portuguese efforts to link the Prester John legend with the kings of

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36 Avril, 154.

37 Ibid.
Ethiopia as a “stupid Error,” and in the following passage Avril summarized the manner in which this turn of events occurred:

In obedience to his Princes Orders, Peter de Covlan [Pero da Covilhã] pass’d into Asia, and penetrated a great way into India, where he learnt many things of great importance and curiosity: But notwithstanding all his diligence, he could not hear of Preste-John, nor meet with any body that could tell any Tidings of him; only coming to Caire, in his return homeward, he heard, that in Ethiopia, beyond Egypt, there reign’d a Rich and Potent Prince, who every time he shew’d himself in publick, had a Cross carry’d before him, and that he was a declar’d Protector of the Christians.

Now in regard these Marks agreed with the Character that had been given to him, to discover the Prince he was in search of, there needed no more to perswade that Traveller into a belief of what he most of all things in the world desir’d to know. So that he made no farther doubt but that Preste-John was that same Monarch of the Abyssinians, and he believed it so truly, that he wrote his Discovery into Portugal without any farther Examination.

Avril’s account of Prester John bears some similarity to the narrative of fellow Jesuit priest Fernão Guerreiro, profiled earlier in this chapter, especially in its flippant dismissal of Portuguese claims to have discovered the long sought after priest-king. Avril, however, also argued that the propagation of the “same stupid Error” by Pero da Covilhã owed something to the gullibility of the Portuguese crown and court officials in their ready acceptance of the findings of the expedition; the following passage offers Avril’s explanation for this “error”:

Nor were they more scrupulous at Lisbonne, where the news was receiv’d with a great deal of joy and applause. Upon which they who sail’d into Africa the following years, prepossess’d with this Opinion, contributed not a little to onfirm it by their Relations; so that as false as it was, the Mistake was soon spread all over Europe.

38 Ibid., 156.
39 Ibid., 155-56.
40 Ibid.
To scholars working with broad assumptions about the extent to which the Scientific Revolution and the European Enlightenment influenced contemporary writers like Philippe Avril, the Jesuit priest’s strong belief that Prester John was really the Dalai Lama must seem disconcerting, or at least anachronistic. Yet if suspected witches were jailed in Britain until at least 1944,\(^{41}\) while widespread sightings and captures of purported mermaids continued through the end of the nineteenth century,\(^{42}\) it should be no surprise that learned Europeans such as Philippe Avril continued to cling to the notion into the eighteenth century that there existed a powerful Christian king in the East whose fantastic kingdom was certainly no more fanciful than equally persistent legends of the centaur, the unicorn, or the phoenix.

*Prester John in the Twentieth Century: A Postscript*

Interestingly, the legend of Prester John also made a brief appearance at the peace negotiations in Versailles after the First World War. War correspondent Stephen Bonsal maintained diaries during the months he spent observing the treaty process, and he recounted an incident that offers insight into the pervasiveness of the Prester John legend in the following passage:

My cab was held up by a dashing troop of cuirassiers, with flowing horse-hair plumes, who were escorting to the Peace Table the belated delegation from Abyssinia, or rather from Ethiopia, as the land of Prester John and the Lion of Judah is generally called here. The delegates were all tall, magnificent-looking men, dark of skin but with Aryan features and robed in long white gowns.\(^{43}\)


While it is utterly dubious that Bonsal placed any serious belief in the continued power of the mythical priest-king, the presence of the legend in a diary entry of a participant in the Versailles peace negotiations is certainly puzzling. What is striking, though, is that the fascinated Bonsal viewed in the Ethiopian dignitaries exactly what he wanted to see: men “dark of skin but with Aryan features.” Like his late medieval and early modern European counterparts, Bonsal searched for recognizable similarities between himself and representatives of the kingdom of Prester John, and he viewed the Ethiopian dignitaries as possessing certain distinct characteristics that would normally be considered European qualities.

While the devoted subjects of Prester John might have seemed exotic – or might appear as Oriental Others – Europeans steadfastly sought commonalities with the people they believed to be powerful coreligionists in the geopolitical struggle against the Islamic world. Bonsal’s commentary on the Ethiopian dignitaries exhibits the fascination with people he considered exotic, while maintaining a steadfast belief that the descendants of Prester John were really more like Europeans than Asians or Africans. Unfortunately, Bonsal’s quixotic preoccupation with Prester John as he pondered the results of the Versailles treaty talks sound in retrospect like a paean to a fading memory.

The next chapter of this dissertation examines how Prester John gradually diminished from historical discourse, a change that coincided with the wave of modernity that followed the First World War.
Chapter Eight

The Gradual Disappearance of Prester John from Historical Discourse

Despite the substantial evidence of the influence of the legend of Prester John on the minds of European rulers, thinkers, and explorers, the topic has not merited an especially significant body of scholarly research and debate among historians, particularly in the past few decades. In the past four decades, there has been only one significant text on the topic published, which was a collection of documents, essays, and out-of-print German-language articles.¹ Similarly, the topic of the legendary kingdom of Prester John has been neglected in academic journals over the same time frame, and there has been little coverage of the subject beyond tangential mentions in articles on medieval legends and literary traditions. Part of this academic dearth undoubtedly owes much to the idea that most historians typically emphasize fact-based research over material that is mythical in nature. At best, myth-based topics such as the legend of Prester John occasionally serve as the subject of Annales-related studies in mentalité, new historicist critiques, or they simply get shuffled aside for academics who specialize in the fields of medieval and early modern literature. Rarely do historians devote much research to the topic of the legend of Prester John, and the mythical priest-king receives little attention in college and high school textbooks.

The decline in the amount of historiographical attention paid to the influence and pervasiveness of the Prester John legend perhaps owes something to the phenomenon of

¹ Beckingham and Hamilton, *Prester John: The Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes.*
historical presentism. This is especially true of historians from the late nineteenth
century into the second half of the twentieth century. In an article examining Otto of
Freising, Dunlop patronizingly dismissed the bishop’s narrative about learning of the
exploits of the legendary Prester John, while smugly reassuring readers that there is “no
reason to doubt the good faith” of Otto; the following passage is typical of the manner in
which this reference is dismissed:

We may assume that he had met the Bishop of Gabala in the circumstances
indicated, and that the latter, who may be expected to have been well informed on
Oriental politics, talked about a Nestorian ruler called John. But apparently Otto
retained only an imperfect impression of the details of his information. He goes
on to offer an account of an enterprise of Prester John which brought that
potentate as far west as Mesopotamia, where he is represented as wintering for
several years. This of course is unhistorical. We know of no such expedition, and
could not fail to have some account of it had it taken place.\(^2\)

Setting aside Dunlop’s obvious logical errors that: a) Western historians already
know all relevant Asian history; and b) the Bishop of Gabala is by default a better
historian than Otto of Freising, the previous passage contains interesting biases on the
part of the writer. Because Dunlop as a twentieth century historian found fanciful the
notion of a powerful Christian priest-king in the Indies, he assumes that Otto “retained
only an imperfect impression” of his meeting with his Syrian counterpart. After all, a
sensible and rational (i.e., modern) writer would not be so naïve as to uncritically record
such obvious falsehoods. After all, as historian Emily C. Bartels noted, “Prester John...
had been around far too long to be real,”\(^3\) which implies that a rational observer would do
the requisite mathematical calculations and figure out that Prester John’s age must be
measured in the hundreds of years. Of course, historians like Dunlop and Bartels miss

\(^2\) Dunlop, 280.

\(^3\) Emily C. Bartels, “Othello and Africa: Postcolonialism Reconsidered,” *The William and Mary
the critical point: in the medieval minds of writers like Otto of Freising, a distant kingdom like that of Prester John was entirely possible, and such a realm meshed well with contemporary and classical accounts of the lands in the East.

There is also a tendency among some historians to make broad generalizations about the worldviews of late medieval and early modern Europeans. Paul Zumther, writing about medieval travel narratives, offered the following periodized assumption about the pervasiveness of the genre:

But after this point [the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries] affection for these narratives waned, as if Europe, sated, were crouching on its prey. Humanism drew on the experience; but scholars, geographers, and cosmographers culled little from a literature they undoubtedly considered with disdain.⁴

A similar sentiment was voiced by the previously referenced Karl F. Helleiner in his cogent analysis of the identity of the writer of the first Letter of Prester John. While discussing the rather fantastic claims made by its author – such as the exotic animals in Prester John’s realm, the priest-king’s unlimited wealth, and the perfect health of his subjects - Helleiner wrote that “the writer must have lost sight of whatever may have been his immediate objectives. He was carried away by his imagination, and composed a work whose character corresponds very closely to modern science fiction.”⁵ Quite a few scholars, such as Jane Tylus, simply dismiss Prester John with a few flippant comments along these lines: “that interesting, equally antiquated Christian, Prester John.”⁶


This scholarly tendency to dismiss the influence of the Prester John legend on the minds of Europeans from the sixteenth century forward is exemplified in the following passage. The authors generalize to the point of ignoring the extensive historical record of the presence of the Prester John legend and other contemporary myths by European explorers and their patrons:

The tall tales and skewed visions of Mandeville, Boemus, Thevet, and others were translated into English for the delight and wonder and only incidentally the enlightenment of the English reading public. By gradual but increasing contrast, the secular-minded explorers who succeeded them in the last quarter of the sixteenth century as England's chief sources of geographical information were more ethnographic, more precise, and generally more truthful. 7

Even more problematic than historical presentism among scholars, however, is the near-complete absence of discussion about the Prester John legend from high school and college textbooks. One might expect at least a few paragraphs in world history and Western civilization textbooks about the influence of the legendary priest-king. However, many texts completely ignore the topic, or dismiss the legend with a single mention in discussions about late medieval travel or exploration. One of the purposes of the present study is to demonstrate through textual analysis the general deficiency of this topic in these narratives, with the expectation that raising awareness of Prester John’s “disappearance” will help rehabilitate this mythical figure’s reputation among the academy.

In a study of twenty survey-level textbooks in which the Prester John legend would fit the narrative, 8 only 15 percent of textbooks devoted at least two sentences to the


8 See Appendix M for complete survey results. Textbook curricular foci included world history, European history, and Western civilization courses.
mythical priest-king. Another 10 percent of the surveyed textbooks briefly mentioned Prester John in less than two sentences, while in a smaller group the legend of Prester John was implied with a phrase such as “distant Christian lands.” A full 65 percent of survey-level textbooks did not mention the Prester John legend, nor did they implicitly reference the legend.

Many college world history, European history, and Western civilization textbooks simply omit any mention of the legend of Prester John from the narrative. With some texts the omission of information on Prester John seems an oversight, while in others there are obvious interpretative biases that shift the narrative away from themes in which a discussion of the legend Prester John might better inform readers about the motivations of Europeans as they began the processes of exploration, expansion, and exploitation. One popular college survey text published by Oxford University Press that falls into the latter category is Modern History: From the European Age to the New Global Era.9

There is a decidedly economic (not to mention Eurocentric) emphasis in the writing of the material related to European expansion, and the author argued that the principal motivation for European explorers was “their wish to get into easier and more direct contact with the Far East, the source of things badly wanted in Europe, at a time when the Far East wanted virtually nothing Europe could offer in exchange.”10 Ultimately, in the opinion of the author of the section on European expansion, there were “huge profits to be made and great efforts could be justified”11 in these endeavors of exploration. At no

10 Ibid., 127.
11 Ibid., 128.
point does the text reference the European geopolitical aims associated with linking up with potential allies beyond the lands controlled by the Islamic powers. Moreover, even the missionary motivation of Europeans is relegated almost to an afterthought in this text, with the author arguing that economic motivations simply opened up opportunities for “a vent in missionary enterprises.”

Other high school and college textbooks mention the legend of Prester John only in passing. One of the better treatments of the topic is contained in the eighth edition of Pearson Prentice Hall’s *The Heritage of World Civilizations*. This book found enough room to devote two sentences to the mythical priest-king who was so influential in the early centuries of European expansion. In addition, the passage also reflects the geopolitical value that Prester John held for Europeans in their struggles against the Islamic world:

The explorers also kept an eye out for a reportedly friendly Eastern potentate known as Prester John. Rumored to be a potential Christian ally against the Muslim infidel, he was real enough for Vasco da Gama to carry a letter of introduction to him from the Portuguese king, when he sailed east in 1497.

Yet even though Craig *et al.* managed to create space for the legend of Prester John in this popular college world history textbook, there are some problems with even this – by comparison to other textbooks - relatively wordy inclusion. The fact that Prester John was a mythical figure can be discerned by the knowledgeable student of history, but a cursory reading of the passage might lead students to assume that the priest-king was

\[12\] Ibid.

indeed a real historical figure. Moreover, this passage is missing from other versions of the text, such as the “Teaching and Learning Classroom” editions.\textsuperscript{14}

Another example of a textbook that found some room for discussion about the legendary Prester John is the \textit{Civilizations Past & Present} series, published by Pearson Longman.\textsuperscript{15} The narrative includes the development of the Prester John legend (although the authors exclusively focus on Ethiopia as the center of the lands controlled by Prester John), and the text ties Prester John into the reasons for European expansion. However, the authors erroneously claimed that the “idea originated with twelfth century Crusaders in the Holy Land,”\textsuperscript{16} and the text all but ignores the influence of the Prester John legend on later voyages of exploration, including that of Vasco da Gama.\textsuperscript{17} There is a brief mention of the excitement of the Portuguese at the discovery of a cross in a 1486 West African embassy,\textsuperscript{18} but otherwise the text compartmentalizes the legendary Prester John into being a brief medieval sideshow.

\textsuperscript{14} Albert M. Craig, William A. Graham, Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, and Frank M. Turner, \textit{The Heritage of World Civilizations, Combined Volumes (Teaching and Learning Classroom Edition - Brief 3\textsuperscript{rd} Edition)} (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007). The Brief 4\textsuperscript{th} Edition contains the following sentence about Prester John: “The explorers also kept an eye out for ‘Prester John,’ rumored to be a potential Christian ally against the Muslim infidel” (p. 407). This is a shortened version of the two-sentence passage in the eighth edition.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 483.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 485. Readers are likely to leave the text’s discussion about Vasco da Gama’s first voyage with the impression that the Portuguese were simply on a shopping expedition to procure supplies of pepper and cinnamon for European customers.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 488.
By far the most accurate and complete coverage of the legendary Prester John by a survey-level textbook was to be found in Philip C. Naylor’s *The Wider West*.\(^{19}\) The author included a half-page boxed insert about Prester John as one of the “trans-cultural context” themes related to European expansion. Naylor provided a brief summary of the mythical priest-king, described how Prester John “stimulated the adventurous imagination of the Portuguese,”\(^{20}\) and offered a few examples of Portuguese attempts to ally with Prester John, including the 1494 expedition by Pero da Covilhã (profiled in the sixth chapter of this dissertation). While the narrative could be improved by noting that the Prester John legend was far from the sole province of the imaginations of the Portuguese (not to mention that the mythical figure’s influence extended far beyond the medieval era), Naylor’s text is to be commended for its relatively thorough coverage. Unfortunately, the textbook was a custom publishing edition, and the otherwise exemplary *The Wider West* is currently out of print. The status of Naylor’s textbook might also serve as an ironic commentary about the current state of college textbook publishing, in that frustrated scholars sometimes have to take it upon themselves to produce a text that accurately captures the history they are teaching.

When high school and college textbooks mention Prester John at all, it is usually in the fashion exhibited by Houghton Mifflin’s *Societies, Networks, and Transitions: A Global History* series.\(^{21}\) The text included Prester John as one of many motivations for Europeans in their growing efforts at expansion, describing the legendary priest-king as a

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., 8.

“great Christian emperor in Africa” and a “possible ally against the Muslims.”22

However, the mythical Prester John is not to be found in other discussions of European expansion or the Western quest for geographical knowledge.

One global history text in particular stands out in its glaring omission of the legend of Prester John. Felipe Fernández-Armesto’s *The World: A History*23 is a book that one might expect would contain at least a passing reference to Prester John. Fernández-Armesto is a renowned historian of the Iberians and European expansion, and he certainly understands the role played by Prester John in the evolution of Iberian beliefs about geography and exploration. Moreover, the text already incorporates a significant amount of textual references to the role of literature and mythology in European expansion, as Fernández-Armesto correctly noted that some of the “former pirates and violent criminals” in the employ of Prince Henry the Navigator “gave themselves storybook names, like Lacelot and Tristram of the Island.”24 Yet surprisingly the author did not see a need to include references to the importance of Prester John to Iberian explorers and their patrons, let alone the legendary priest-king’s lasting influence on late medieval and early modern European ideas of the nature of global civilizations.

As a sort of first line of defense against the accidental or intentional disappearance of history, survey-level textbooks serve an important function in exposing students to the broad outlines of history. As an important factor in the European drives for exploration, exploitation, and expansion, the legendary Prester John deserves at least

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22 Ibid., 410.


24 Ibid., 520.
a brief mention in relevant high school and college textbooks. Unfortunately, the lack of scholarly interest in exploring the topic seems to be related to a concurrent deficiency in textbook coverage on Prester John. One might argue that it is impossible for every topic to be covered in a survey level textbook, and there is some merit to this claim. Yet this researcher argues that the legendary Prester John lived a “life” of over 600 years, and that the influence of this mythical figure is every bit as important as any of the “real” figures that each of the surveyed textbooks profiles.
Chapter Nine

Visual Representations of Prester John and His Kingdom

Commenting on the textual validity and accuracy of European accounts of the Americas, Stephen Greenblatt noted that the only certainty scholars can derive from these works is that they “can be certain only that European representations of the New World tell us something about the European practice of representation.”¹ These are also appropriate guidelines to follow in examining the visual representations that late medieval and early modern Europeans made about the legendary Prester John. The mythical priest-king spawned a wide variety of literary and cartographical works that elaborated on the many facets of the legendary kingdom. Concurrent with the mythical rhetoric is a significant body of visual interpretations by European artists of what this eastern potentate looked like. These primarily took the form of map and book illustrations, and this chapter examines the evolving visual representations that European artists developed of Prester John.

In general, there was a gradual evolution over time in European artistic depictions of the legendary Prester John. Earlier images tended to illustrate the mythical priest-king with facial features and skin colors similar to Europeans, while later representations began to depict Prester John with the more “exotic” features imagined to be associated with people in Africa or eastern Asia. Yet there are exceptions to this generalization, and

¹ Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions, 7.
I might also argue that visual depictions by European artists of Prester John reflected their own assumptions about the manner in which Prester John was portrayed. Many of these depictions tell modern observers more about the ways in which the European artists wanted Prester John to look, as opposed to what these artists thought he looked like.

This chapter provides a series of scanned images from texts representative of the body of late medieval and early modern literature related to the legend of Prester John. Relevant images are then analyzed for evidence of particular cultural biases and assumptions that the requisite illustrators may have possessed as they created their depictions of Prester John and his mythical kingdom.

*The Map of Fra Mauro (1459)*

Among the most significant late medieval visual representations of the kingdom of Prester John are those found in the *mappamundi* created by Fra Mauro, a fifteenth century Camaldolese monk and mapmaker in Venice. King Afonso V of Portugal commissioned Far Mauro to create this cartographic masterpiece, though the copy sent to Portugal has not survived. In one lengthy inscription Fra Mauro claimed that he used Portuguese maps from fifteenth century explorations of the Atlantic coast in the preparation of his *mappamundi*. ² This makes perfect sense, as his Portuguese connections meant that Frau Mauro had access to the most advanced geographical and navigational information of the middle fifteenth century. The Frau Mauro map serves as a kind of

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² Piero Falchetta, in the Introduction to *Fra Mauro’s World Map: With a Commentary and Translations of the Inscriptions* (Venice: Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, 2006). This exhaustive and encyclopedic analysis of every textual reference in Fra Mauro’s map is an incredible resource to any scholar interested in late medieval representations of the world. Especially useful – and an item that more than justifies the rather steep list price – is the inclusion of an interactive CD-ROM that allows users to study the Fra Mauro map with better resolution than if they gained access to the original map at the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice.
intellectual barometer that measures the state of late medieval European beliefs about
global geography.

Fra Mauro’s map is a circular planisphere drawn on parchment that has been set
by curators in a wooden frame, and the entire map stretches about six feet in diameter. The map is oriented with the south at the top and the east on the right as the viewer stands in front of it, as seen below:

![Figure 9.1 - Front view of Fra Mauro map](image)

The land of “Abassia,” which Fra Mauro identified in his map as the central
region in the immense kingdom of Prester John, merited considerable textual attention on the parchment by the cartographer-friar. Abassia is depicted in the map with large castles and palaces that exceed those of any other African potentate in opulence, size, and

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quantity. In addition, the country of Abassia (Fra Mauro’s term for Abyssinia) possessed agricultural wealth to match its royal prosperity, and the following Fra Mauro inscription is reminiscent of Paradise in its expression of the earthly splendor and bountiful harvests in Prester John’s realm:

In the woods of this Abassia there is such a great quantity of honey that they do not bother to collect it. When in the winter the great rains wash these trees, that honey flows into some nearby lakes and, thanks to the action of the sun, that water becomes like a wine, and the people of the place drink it in place of wine.4

Likely anticipating that some of the information about the continent of Africa contained in his map might be criticized by others, Fra Mauro included an inscription on the map that outlined his arguments against such criticisms. The Venetian mapmaker argued that his map drew from some of the best available sources, and that classical geographers simply possessed outdated knowledge. In the following passage Frau Mauro

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4 Fra Mauro, 10-I 26. The alphanumeric codes used in the following Fra Mauro footnotes refer to the standard coordinates assigned in the 1956 edition of the map.
defended his work and offered readers a brief summary of the sources that he used in the preparation of his mappamundi:

Because to some it will appear as a novelty that I should speak of these southern parts, which were almost unknown to the Ancients, I will reply that this entire drawing, from Sayto\(^5\) upwards, I have had from those who were born there.\(^6\) These people are clerics who, with their own hands, drew for me these provinces and cities and rivers and mountains with their names; all these things I have not been able to put in due order for lack of space.\(^7\)

In this aesthetically appealing and highly detailed map, Fra Mauro provided quite a few inscriptions that offer insights into the nature of the contemporary European views about Prester John’s kingdom. Fra Mauro wrote that “Prester John has more than 120 kingdoms under his dominion, in which there are more than 60 different languages.”\(^8\)

Indeed, the mapmaker depicted perhaps as much as two-thirds of the continent of Africa being subject to Prester John, and according to the inscriptions, a number of the other African monarchs paid tribute to Prester John. One of the newest areas added to the realm of Prester John, according to Fra Mauro, was a “most fertile region” conquered by the “great king of Abassia” somewhere near the year 1430.\(^9\) Fra Mauro located this land between the regions of Mogodisso and Sacara.\(^10\) Fra Mauro identified and had much to say another tribute-paying land that fell under the authority of Prester John; in the

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\(^{5}\) A land that Fra Mauro placed just upriver of Nubia on the Nile.

\(^{6}\) This passage suggests that Fra Mauro may have interviewed some of the Ethiopian dignitaries who traveled to Europe, representing the patriarch and attending the Council of Florence in 1441.

\(^{7}\) Fra Mauro, 10-16.

\(^{8}\) Ibid., 10-F37.

\(^{9}\) Ibid., 09-b35

\(^{10}\) Evidently the Somalian city of Mogadishu and Saqqara, the necropolis of the Egyptian city of Memphis. The siting of these cities on Fra Mauro’s map, of course, do not correspond well with their actual locations. Falchetta suggested that the Sacara name, which Fra Mauro equated with “manna,” was an important region of sugar production.
following passage he discussed the violent and uncivilized nature of some of these peoples:

Above [that is, south of] the Kingdom of Abbassia there is a very savage and idolatrous people who are separated from Abbassia by a river and by mountains, at the passes of which the kings of Abbassia have built great fortresses so that these peoples cannot pass and do harm to their country. These men are very strong and of great stature and they pay tribute to Prester John, King of Abassia, and certain thousands of these men serve him to his needs etc.  

In addition to the people of “great stature” mentioned above, Fra Mauro described a number of unusual creatures common to medieval European traditions about lands beyond the Mediterranean basin. He noted that “various historiographers write of the source of the Garamantes, which is so hot at night that anyone putting their hand in the water would be scolded; whereas during the day, the water is so cold one cannot stand it.” Fra Mauro also included information from classical writers on “the Panphagi, the Agriophagi, the Antropophagi and the Cinomolgi and their bestial customs.”

Finally, Fra Mauro indicated that the lands beyond Mediterranean Africa contained

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11 Fra Mauro, 10-A38.


13 Ibid., 17-C26.

14 Panphagi: “eaters of everything.”

15 Agriophagi: “eaters of the meat of wild animals.”

16 Probably anthropophagi, “cannibals.”

17 Probably cinamolgi, “dog-milkers.”

18 Ibid.
“certain monstrous animals - such as serpents, dragons and basilisks - and give other information I cannot mention here.”  

Fra Mauro noted that one of the reasons for the impressive power wielded by Prester John is due to “the numbers of his people, who are almost infinite.”  

This “almost infinite” population allowed Prester John to field tremendous armies, according to Fra Mauro, and that “when this lord travels with his host of armies, he has with him one million men.”

Far Mauro described the warriors of Prester John as men who “who go naked into battle, except that many of them wear crocodile skin in place of armor.”

From his Ethiopian sources Fra Mauro developed a cartographical image of the extent of the realm of Prester John. The persons with whom he claimed to converse indicated that “their territory is more extensive to the south of the sources of the Nile than to the north.”  

Fra Mauro indicated that his sources claimed that there existed “rivers there that are larger than the Nile, which amongst us is so famous for its size.”

The source of the Nile fell in the kingdom of Prester John, Fra Mauro noted, and the friar-mapmaker was told that “at the time of their winter, between May and June, due to the great rains, these rivers swell and thus swell the Nile, which rises until it floods Egypt, as is well known.”

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 10-g8.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 17-A5.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
Fra Mauro may have possessed some skepticism on the received knowledge of classical geographers, but he was cautious in any criticisms he might have made about the likes of Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy. He noted that there were “many cosmographers and most learned men who write that in this Africa - and, above all, in the Mauritanias - there are human and animal monsters.” 26 While providing his opinion on the monsters and wonders of Africa, Fra Mauro wanted to make sure that readers did not assume that he was trying to “contradict the authority of these men,” 27 but because of “the care I have taken in all these years in studying all possible information concerning Africa,” he was reluctant to refute over a thousand years of classical knowledge. Nonetheless, Fra Mauro seemed to have reservations about some of what he read in his studies:

And in all these kingdoms of the negroes I have never found anyone who could give me information on what those men have written. Thus, not knowing anything, I cannot bear witness to anything; and I leave research in the matter to those who are curious about such things. 28

*Prester John in the Nuremberg Chronicle (1493)*

Hartman Schedel’s *Liber Chronicarum*, better known to the English-speaking world as the *Nuremburg Chronicle*, is an illustrated history of the world that serves as a compendium of European knowledge of human civilizations in the late fifteenth century. Not surprisingly, Prester John received a significant amount of attention from Schedel, whose writing reflected his reliance upon the standard literary and geographical works of the period. The illustrator who produced woodcuts for the *Chronicle* created an image of the legendary Prester John that evoked themes decidedly more religious than secular in

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26 Ibid., 23-B13.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.
describing the mythical priest-king. Below is a scanned image of the woodcut included in *Liber Chronicarum*:

Figure 9.3 - Prester John illustrated in Hartmann Schedel's *Nuremberg Chronicle*, 1493

The image depicts a seated Prester John performing the sacrament of the Eucharist with kneeling subjects receiving communion wafers. Interestingly, the artist provided Prester John with a halo, making the obvious connection that the legendary priest-king’s piety had elevated him to a status approaching the divine, or at least making him worthy of veneration as a living saint. The setting of the scene is in a European-style church, and what appears to be a mural behind Prester John and the supplicants contains images of saints, all of whom gaze upon the gathered faithful with approving, beatific looks.
Prester John and Giuliano Dati (ca. 1499)

Italian poet Giuliano Dati, one of the premiere European poets of the late fifteenth century,²⁹ composed a pair of poems to the mythical priest-king Prester John. The first of these poems was entitled Treatise on the Supreme Prester John, Pope and Emperor of India and Ethiopia, while the second poem bore the slightly less magnanimous title of Second Song of India. The frontispiece of the published poems depicts Prester John with decidedly European features, and the setting of the priest-king’s court is not unlike those found in Europe at the time.

Figure 9.4 - Frontispiece to the poem “The Great Magnificence of Prester John, Lord of Greater India and of Ethiopia,” by Giuliano Dati³⁰

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²⁹ Rogers, The Quest for Eastern Christians, 94.

³⁰ A copy of the the printed poem, which was published in Florence, is available at the British Museum: C.20. C.23.
The unknown artist who created the frontispiece illustration provided this Prester John with an impressive crown containing jewels in the shape of the *fleur de lis*. Prester John in this image appears to be blessing the suppliants who remain seated before him, and he holds up two fingers in much the same manner as does the Roman Catholic Pope. The image is suggestive of a ruler with both religious and secular authority, certainly in keeping with Prester John’s role as king and patriarch.

The people who surround Prester John in the image also bear similarities to depictions of Europeans in the late fifteenth century. Interestingly, Prester John finds himself holding court over twelve individuals, perhaps an apostolic tip of the cap to Christ. Eleven of the visitors to the court of Prester John are bearded and wear cloaks and hats not unlike those worn by fifteenth century Franciscan prelates, while one person directly to the right of Prester John has decidedly feminine feature and is wearing what appears to be a nun’s habit. One is tempted to draw parallels between the symbolism in this image and Leonardo da Vinci’s *L’Ultima Cena*; the timing happens to fit, but there may be additional reasons why this image shares some similarities with the aforementioned Milanese mural of such historical renown. In this illustration to the chapbook’s frontispiece, the artist depicted Prester John’s court above seven steps, each of which contains an admonition to readers to flee (“FVGE”) the seven deadly sins:

![Inscription of the seven deadly sins, Giuliano Dati](image)
In keeping with existing beliefs about the exotic lands over which Prester John reigned, the Dati chapbook contains additional woodcut illustrations, and these perpetuated the fabulous elements of the Prester John legend. Not surprisingly, the influence of classical and medieval mythology can be noticed in this image. An example of one such woodcut provided European readers with a visual collection of freakish beings found in the lands of Prester John:

Figure 9.6 - Woodcut illustration in chapbook edition of Treatise on the Supreme Prester John featuring monstrous beings that supposedly existed in the lands of the kingdom of Prester John

_31_ Each of the cardinal sins is also associated in this illustration with a particular element; for example gluttony (gulam) in this woodcut was associated with lead (plumbo).
The image contains three figures, including the *Monoculi* (one-eyed beings), *Cynocephali* (dog-headed beings), and a particularly graphic and peculiar image of a sexually dichotomized “Hermofrodite.” All of the mythical creatures bear some form of weaponry, reinforcing the dangerous nature of some of the territories controlled by Prester John. None of the figures wears any clothes, which is certainly in keeping with the exotic sexuality long associated by Europeans with distant lands. Interestingly, the figures of the *monoculus* and *cynocephalus* exhibit an element of modesty as they cover their genitalia in the woodcut, yet the hermaphroditic figure seems to show no such interest in shielding the viewers from the sexual deviance that awaits those who leave the relatively safe confines of late medieval Europe in search of the lands of Prester John. Still, even the presence of monsters and freaks likely served to at least pique the curiosity of European readers, even if they may have served to deter some would-be explorers from venturing overseas.

*Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Indias (1540)*

Lisbon publisher Luís Rodrigues produced in 1540 a one-volume folio of the narrative of the Portuguese missionary Francisco Álvares, who visited Ethiopia in 1540 (see Chapter VI for a lengthier account of the journey of Álvares). The text was entitled *Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Indias* (“A True Relation of the Lands of Prester John of the Indies”), although Beckingham and Huntingford observed that only a portion of the *Verdadeira Informação* wound up in this first printing of the writings of Álvares. Born somewhere around the year 1465 in the Portuguese city of

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Coimbra, Álvares served as a priest in the court of Portuguese king Manuel I. It was during his role in this capacity that Álvares was selected to join a delegation that was sent to the Emperor of Ethiopia, who the Portuguese had equated with Prester John. The group departed from Lisbon in 1515, but they did not actually reach the imperial court until 1520. A more complete account of the embassy of Álvares can be found in the fifth chapter of this dissertation.

The vignette created by the unknown artist on the cover of the folio edition of the Verdadeira Informação is decidedly late medieval European in style and content. The artist likely was influenced as much by the traditional beliefs he held regarding the fabled kingdom of Prester John as much as he was by the text itself. The following scanned image of the folio cover offers some clues into the ways in which early sixteenth century Europeans viewed the legendary Prester John:
The Prester John in this image, not surprisingly, looks as though he would not be out of place in an Iberian royal court. This depiction of Prester John takes on a decidedly military bent, as the legendary priest-king is astride an armored mount and is accompanied by knights, pages, and squires. Prester John and his attendants exhibit distinctly European features: light skin, aquiline noses, and contemporary European hair styles. The clothing and armor worn by Prester John and his followers are typical for Europeans in the late medieval period, and there is considerable use of Christian iconography in the woodcut. One gets the impression that the Prester John imagined by the artist responsible for illustrating Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Indias might be heading out to face an enemy in the Alentejou or Extremadura, rather than leaving for a battle against the likes of the fearsome beasts such as the Cynocephali that purportedly populated the lands of the kingdom of Prester John.

The buildings in (and setting of) the court of Prester John in this depiction also demonstrate a decidedly Iberian influence. There is an interesting blend of Asturian, Romanesque, and Mudéjar styles in this illustration. Of particular interest is the red ceramic barrel-tile roof on the buildings in the compound where Prester John is departing on his armored horse, long a staple of Iberian architecture and one that followed the Spaniards and Portuguese in their colonial endeavors. The walls of the compound appear to be composed of either white brick or white clay plaster, both commonly found in Iberian architecture and in particular buildings influenced by the Mudéjar style.33 Yet above all the court of Prester John imagined by the artist who created the cover folio for

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33 For a brief but thorough overview of the Mudéjar style, see L. P. Harvey, *Islamic Spain, 1250 to 1500* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Indias was one with a primarily military function. The structures contain quite a few accoutrements typical for a late medieval castle, such as siege towers, arrow slits, curtain walls, and battlements. This Prester John, it seems, was a military-minded sort whose royal court and buildings were built for a war footing.

One might argue that the artist who created the folio illustration was simply influenced by the world in which he lived, and that this artist used the nearby buildings, people, and environment for convenient models upon which to base this artwork. Yet to make this argument is to ignore the role of imagination in art: the artist who designed this image believed that Prester John lived in a world much like that of the European monarchs for whom he had at least tangential knowledge. A depiction of Prester John that uses contemporary motifs indicates that the artist believed that the legendary priest-king was more similar to than he was different from his European counterparts. In large measure this was a function of Prester John’s supposedly Christian faith, as it would be unseemly to create an image of a powerful Christian leader (and potential ally against the forces of Islam) who did not possess the expected characteristics of such a ruler.

*Gerardus Mercator – 1569*

The revolutionary mapmaking techniques employed by sixteenth century Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator need not be retold in their entirety. The genius of Mercator, as one historical geographer described, “lay in designing a chart which at first sight had no novelty other than its elimination of a gross error.”  

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this dissertation, though, Mercator commands considerable interest, for this innovative and influential cartographer steadfastly included the kingdom of Prester John on the maps he produced in the late sixteenth century, a time when – according to the traditional historiography – Europeans had supposedly dismissed the legendary priest-king as a fanciful myth. One author offered the following assessment of Mercator, held in so high esteem by many as exemplary of evidence of the more scientific approaches to geography and cartography:

[H]ere is Mercator, groping for truth, forced to rely on the opinions of such remote men as Juba, Pliny, Ptolemy, Solinus. His more recent authorities are William of Tripoli, a Dominican convert of about 1250; Marco Polo, always called Ven.[etus], 1254-1324; Sir John Mandeville, circa 1332…These it will be observed are none too "recent," even to Mercator's own times. He must have known of the discoveries made during the time of Prince Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), and later by Vasco da Gama (1469-1524); and such he accepts tacitly. Apparently he knew of no recent explorers to help him about India, China, northern Asia, or the interior of Africa. He gives us a long discussion "about the true location of the Ganges and the Golden Peninsula," trying to distinguish the Ganges from a stream called Guenga; in the end he seems inclined to put the Ganges in what we should call eastern China.  

Pictured below is a scanned image of the African continent as Mercator understood it:

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Figure 9.8 – Mercator’s map of Africa, 1569

Though Mercator largely ignored ornamentation and decoration in the production of this 1569 map, the cartographer did see a need to include an image of Prester John in his depiction of the continent of Africa. Scanned below is an image of Prester John as conceived by Mercator:

![Image of Prester John on Mercator map, 1569](image)

Figure 9.9 – image of Prester John on Mercator map, 1569

Mercator’s Prester John is depicted by the mapmaker as seated on a royal throne and holding up a cross, symbolizing his dual role as temporal and spiritual leader of his empire. The inscription reads *Prete Giam magnus imperator Abbissini* (“Prester John, great emperor of the Abyssinians”). Interestingly Mercator imagined the kingdom of Prester John as being centered on the upper Nile River, evoking earlier traditions of the mighty priest-king possessing the power to regulate or shut off the flow of the life-giving Nile.

Though this image of Prester John lacks detail, viewers can easily discern that Mercator imagined the Abyssinian ruler as being European in physical form. The priest-king’s skin was not darkened by the mapmaker, and Prester John wears Renaissance-style clothing, making him look more like Lorenzo de’ Medici than an African, Arabic, or Turkish ruler. More importantly, the fact that Mercator chose to present only one illustrated ruler on the continent of Africa – Prester John – suggests an imagined sense of
geopolitical primacy toward the legendary priest-king on the part of the Flemish cartographer.

This importance in maintaining the kingdom of Prester John at the physical and figurative center of Africa was shared by Mercator’s grandson, also named Gerardus Mercator. His 1628 map of Africa included an illustrated depiction of the seemingly ageless Prester John; in this scanned image, one can observe that the passing of almost six decades between grandfather and grandson resulted in few changes to the ways in which Prester John had been imagined by European cartographers:

![Figure 9.10 – image of Prester John on Mercator map, 1628](image)

The 1628 Mercator map again depicts a seated Prester John with a cross, and the mythical potentate still faces east. The priest-king in this image wears a flowing royal robe instead of what appears to be a mandilion on Prester John in the 1569 map. On the head of Prester John is a more elaborate crown in the 1628 image, implying at least a sense of continuity in the perceived importance held by the illustrator toward the priest-king in continental and regional affairs. Both Mercator maps (as well as the range of maps produced by members of the Mercator family and employees of the family business during this period) provided a prominent place for the kingdom of Prester John. While some Europeans in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had begun the
process of moving away from a strong belief in the power and wealth of Prester John, clearly the notion of this mighty priest-king remained a source of fascination for many learned Europeans, and the Mercator maps serve as evidence of this continued allure. Yet despite his innovative techniques, Gerardus Mercator and his work remained relatively unknown beyond a small circle of geographical and cartographical experts, and it would take the efforts of another Flemish cartographer to bring Mercator’s projections to a wider audience.36

*Abissinorum sive Pretiosi Johannis Imperii* (1606)

The Flemish engraver and cartographer Jodocus Hondius first made a name for himself producing illustrations based on the voyages of Francis Drake. Hondius, however, is better known to modern historians for his 1604 purchase of the copper plates and publishing rights of the Mercator maps.37 Hondius did not waste time in bringing the Mercator maps to the burgeoning European map market, and he added a few missing maps to create a collection that offered purchasers an up-to-date view of the world. Below is a scanned image of the map of the kingdom of Prester John in the set:


37 Ibid., 44.
The map of Prester John’s realm is largely based on the account of Duarte Lopes (1591) and its transcription by Filippo Pigafetta. It is worth noting that Hondius believed that the kingdom of Prester John merited its own page in the atlas, one of the few kingdoms that was so honored.

The map is typical for early-to-mid-seventeenth century maps in its presentation of the kingdom of Prester John. The area reserved to Prester John’s realm is approximately 30 percent of the land mass of the African continent, suggesting the primacy of the legendary priest-king over sub-Saharan Africa. The map’s annotations describe the wealth and power of Prester John, and there is no sense that Hondius does not take at face value the still-prevailing notion that Prester John is an important Christian monarch.

Nicholas Visscher and Prester John

The English ecclesiastic Peter Heylyn’s 1652 *Cosmographie* represented yet another attempt by a European author to produce a comprehensive work that described the known world. Heylyn was a fellow and lecturer at Magdalen College of Oxford, and
his first foray into geography was the 1621 *Microcosmus* (“a little description of the great world”).

A staunch Anglican and Royalist, Heylyn transitioned from the field of divinity in 1647 near the end of the English Civil War. Gilbert noted that Heylyn was able “to settle at Minster Lovell and returned from theology to the study of geography and history, which he had loved in his youth.”

Heylyn spent the next five years composing the *Cosmographie*, a work that reflected his interest in Ptolemy, Pliny, and the earlier geographical work of George Abbott. Gilbert suggested that Heylyn was also influenced by the writings of German writer Bartholomäus Keckermann as well as those of French legal scholar Jean Bodin and French poet Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas. The *Cosmographie* went through many editions, including a highly regarded sixth edition in 1682, and the work remained a standard geography text into the eighteenth century.

Among the specialists retained by London publisher Henry Seile to provide maps for Heylyn’s *Cosmographie* was Dutch cartographer Nicolas Visscher. Born in 1618 in Wenns, Austria, Visscher inherited in 1652 the Amsterdam mapmaking business created by his father Claes Janszoon Visscher, and the Visscher family developed a reputation as elite cartographers in the Dutch Golden Age.

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39 Ibid., 495.
41 Gilbert, 495.
42 Ibid.
Yet despite the fact that Visscher possessed the most up-to-date European geographical information - especially given his work with the VOC - Visscher maps of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries reflect a continued reliance upon classical and medieval traditions. This is in decided contrast with the assumptions of some scholars who take for granted a level of modernity that did not necessarily exist among sixteenth and seventeenth century Europeans. Brodsky noted that much like his contemporaries Visscher continued to place value on the Bible as a literal source of geographical information, and that he typically included locations in the modern Levant for the Pentateuchal city of Dan on his maps.\textsuperscript{44} Depicted below is the Visscher representation of the continent of Africa, which included the placement of the kingdom of Prester John at the continental center in keeping with the discoveries and embassies of the Portuguese:

\textsuperscript{44} Harold Brodsky, “Interpretation of Maps Based on the Bible,” \textit{Geographical Review} Vol. 82(4) (Oct., 1992), 430-440. Dan is mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament, including Genesis 14:14 (“And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan.”) The city is generally considered by biblical scholars to have been northernmost town of the Kingdom of Israel, and previously served as a center for the Tribe of Dan.
Visscher’s map of Africa possesses a fairly accurate depiction of the outlines of the continent, though its sense of scale and proportion are somewhat skewed. Visscher imagined the Sahara Desert to be much smaller than its actual size, and the map contains quite a few imagined mountain ranges and interior bodies of water that bear no similarity to the true topography of the continent of Africa. Interestingly, though, the Tropic of Capricorn, the Tropic of Cancer, and the Equator correspond quite well with their geographical counterparts on modern maps. This suggests an intuitive proposition that distances relatively far removed from African coasts remained largely imagined spaces to Europeans until well into the nineteenth century.
It is the manner in which Visscher depicted the interior of the African continent, however, that is of interest to this study, and the mapmaker’s understanding on the societies and states that inhabited the regions farther removed from the coasts is in contrast should best be described as almost medieval in nature. In many ways the Africa understood by seventeenth century Europeans such as Nicolas Visscher is not incompatible with the beliefs held about Africa by medieval and even classical Europeans. Chief among the European geographical traditions that Visscher included in this map is the presence of a powerful Abyssinian ruler who possessed vast domains in the African continent.

![Figure 9.13 - Prester John as depicted in New, Plaine, & Exact Mapp of Africa (1652)](image)

The figure of Prester John (“King of Abissines”) depicted on Visscher’s map shows evidence of an evolution in European visual representations of the legendary priest-king. The skin color of Prester John is decidedly darker in color than in earlier European representations of the priest-king (though lighter in tone than many contemporary depictions of sub-Saharan Africans), and the facial features of the subject possess characteristics substantially more African than European. Yet Prester John also wears an elaborate European-style crown bedecked with precious stones, implying that
the artist believed that this monarch was a king of substantial wealth and power. Moreover, Visscher’s Prester John is arguably more European-like in depiction than any of the other monarchs chosen for the map. The four “African” kings are depicted wearing an array of exotic headgear featuring items such as feathers and horns, while the “King of Morrocca”\textsuperscript{45} wears an enormous round turban similar to the headpiece worn by the Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. By contrast, the Prester John as depicted by Visscher even has ornamentation similar to the fleur de lis so closely associated with the heraldry of the French.

The spatial positioning of Prester John by Visscher and the geographical depiction of Abyssinia on the map is also worthy of examination. Visscher imagined that Africa contained six kings worthy of mention (“Abissines,” “Conga,” “Guinea,” “Morrocca,” “Madagascar,” and “Mozambique”), and Prester John occupies the top right hand corner of the map. This implies primacy of importance for Prester John, as the depicted African kings are not arranged in any order that reflects geography. In addition, the space allotted to Abyssinia on the map encompasses approximately one-third of the African continent’s total area and perhaps slightly more than half of sub-Saharan Africa.

It is also within the imagined boundaries of the kingdom of Prester John that Visscher included quite a variety of mythical and legendary items believed by late medieval and early modern Europeans to exist in Africa. Visscher included a “Zair Lake” from which the Congo and Nile Rivers supposedly emanated, which was a body of water that Visscher claimed was “where ye Tritons and Mermaids are said to be.”\textsuperscript{46} The

\textsuperscript{45} The actual ruler of the regions historically known as “Morrocco” at the time of Heylyn’s Cosmographie was the sultan Moulay Ali Cherif, founder of the Alaouite Dynasty.

\textsuperscript{46} Visscher, in Heylyn, Cosmographie.
southern borders of the land of Prester John are the location of the Mountains of the Moon, also believed by Europeans to be the source of the Nile River; the aforementioned “Zaire Lake” appears to be at the northernmost reaches of this mythical mountain chain. To the east of “Zair Lake” Visscher placed “Fungi Cafates,” a region where “the Amazones are said to inhabit as also in ye kingdoms of Zet and Gavi Cafates.”

Merian Map (1630)

The seventeenth century engraver and mapmaker Matthäus Merian der Ältre – born in Basel and working most of his life in the city of Frankfurt – produced a world map in his 21-volume *Topographia*, a work that went through many editions and found popularity throughout Europe. Merian was the son-in-law of noted publisher Peter Overstadt, and his work can be considered to be representative of what has become known as the Cologne school of cartography. Below is scanned image of his depiction of the kingdom of Prester John, whose imperial territory in the mind of Merian spanned approximately one-third of the land mass of the African continent:

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47 The idea of the Mountains of the Moon traces its origin back to classical writers such as Diogenes and Ptolemy.

48 Visscher, in Heylyn, *Cosmographie*. Many of these features also correspond with the 1650 map by Ortelius, suggesting that Visscher was at least acquainted with the earlier map.

Figure 9.14 - Map by Merian (1630) entitled “Aethiopia Superior vel Interior vulgo Abissinorum sive Presbiterioannis Imperium.”

The boundaries of the kingdom of Prester John as imagined by Merian are somewhat smaller than earlier European maps. This may be indicative of the beginnings of a mid-seventeenth century trend toward a reduction in the size of Prester John’s kingdom as being a function of the gradually decreasing sense of importance that Europeans held toward the legendary priest-king. One might also argue that the concurrent belief in the kingdom of Monomatapa may have also contributed to a perceived reduction in territorial holdings of Prester John.\(^50\) Still, the territory believed to be controlled by Prester John in this map is approximately one-fourth of the land mass of the African continent.

\(^{50}\) The kingdom of Monomatapa (or simply Mutapa) encompassed the regions around the renowned site of Great Zimbabwe. There was an early modern belief among many Europeans that the Monomatapa empire possessed vast goldmines, and this morphed into the idea that the goldmines of Monomatapa were the legendary mines of King Solomon. The region certainly had access to gold, though the dreams of an African Eldorado were unfulfilled, at least if one ignores the nineteenth century Witwatersrand gold strike. For more information on the Mutapa Empire, see D. N. Beach, “The Mutapa Dynasty: A Comparison of Documentary and Traditional Evidence,” *History in Africa* 3 (1976), 1-17. On European fascination with the goldmining potential of the Mutapa Empire, see Glenn J. Ames, “An African Eldorado? The Portuguese Quest for Wealth and Power in Mozambique and the Rios de Cuama, c. 1661-1683,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 31:1 (1998), 91-110.
Yet Marian’s map is indeed highly typical of seventeenth century European maps, which continued to depict central and eastern Africa as the “home” of the kingdom of Prester John. It is not until the late seventeenth century that the legendary priest-king began to disappear from contemporary maps. While some scholars might dismiss the continued presence of Prester John on maps as either rote adherence to traditional forms or as archaic artistic embellishments, the fact that the kingdom of Prester John remained a cartographic staple for so many centuries suggests that – for many Europeans – the legendary priest-king remained an imagined figure in the Earth’s cosmography.

_Baltazar Tellez_

The Jesuit writer and priest Balthazar Tellez compiled a book on the kingdom of Prester John that was published in Frankfort in 1682. Tellez made extensive use of the histories of Manuel Almeida, Jeronimo Lobo, and Alfonzo Mendez in the production of his _Historia Geral de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia do Preste Ioam._ The text displays the gradual decline in the perceived importance of Prester John in the minds of Europeans, and the priest-king as depicted by the author is not nearly as powerful as earlier textual descriptions.

The writings of Tellez continued to interest Europeans well into the eighteenth century. In 1707 the _Académie Royale des Sciences_ disputed the claim by Tellez that the island of Meroe did not exist. While acknowledging that Tellez had “well considered all that the missionaries of his [Jesuit] society have written upon Ethiopia,” the _Académie Royale des Sciences, The Philosophical History and Memoirs of the Royal Academy of Sciences_ (translated by John Martin and Ephraim Chambers), (London: John and Paul Knapton, 1742), 134-135. Tellez made his observations in Chapter V of _Historia Geral de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia do Preste Ioam._

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52 _Académie Royale des Sciences_.
was of the opinion that “it is strange that anyone could doubt the existence of the island of Meroe, after what has been noted by the ancients with relation to it.” Among the most important of the ancient writers whose opinions mattered most to the Académie with regard to Meroe and Ethiopia was none other than Pliny the Elder.

Figure 9.15 – Frontispiece: *Historia Geral de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia do Preste Ioam*

The Prester John imagined by the unnamed artist who designed the frontispiece to *Historia Geral de Ethiopia* retained some of the European features of earlier artistic renditions of Prester John and his kingdom, but the trend in this image is toward a sort of Africanization of the legendary character. Prester John’s skin tone is darker, and many of

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53 Ibid., 135.

54 Frontispiece from Baltazar Tellez, *Historia Geral de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia do Preste Ioam e do que nella obraram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus: composta na mesma Ethiopia pelo Padre Manoel d’Almeida, natural de Visev, Provincial e Visitador, que foy na Índia. Abreviada com nova releýçam, e method* (Coimbra, Officina de Manoel Dias Impressor de Universidade, 1660).
his subjects wear simple clothing while walking barefoot. The setting of Prester John’s
court appears to be rather tropical, with a group of palm trees surrounding the royal
throne. Prester John is dressed in clothing that would not be considered typical for a
seventeenth century European monarch, and he is depicted wearing what appears to be a
leopard-skin shawl and light-colored leather boots. Not present in this image, however,
are the earlier material signs of opulence and power.

The artist imagining this scene chose to emphasize the spiritual rather than
military powers of Prester John. Approaching the throne are a group of ecclesiastical
figures, including one individual who might be characterized as a bishop or archbishop.
These might be missionaries, as the depicted scene contains quite a few representations of
Christogram IHS, which is incorporated into the seal of the Society of Jesus. Completing
the religious theme of the illustration is the inclusion of winged cherubim floating above
the throne of Prester John.

The illustrations in Historia Geral de Ethiopia are representative of the changing
nature of the imagined Prester John. Visual depictions of the legendary priest-king
evolved from a late medieval emphasis on the decidedly European nature of Prester John
to seventeenth century perceptions of a ruler more African than European. Yet into the
eighteenth century this mythical figure continued to fascinate Europeans, and even if the
size of his perceived empire began to shrink, Prester John remained a source of
inspiration to European minds.
Chapter 10
Conclusions

Prester John influenced the imaginations of late medieval and early modern Europeans, and this mythical figure represented an eastern Christian emperor who - if only the distant monarch could be contacted - would be a valuable ally in the struggle against the forces of Islam. While his existence owed more to European geopolitical and religious desires than to actual history, the imaginary priest-king nonetheless served to influence the actions of western Christians from the beginning of the Crusades through the first century of the period that Parry described as the “Age of Reconnaissance.”

In addition, the Byzantine apocalyptic tradition established a literary convention of predicting the existence and arrival of a pious potentate who would deliver the Christian world from the pagan hordes and Muslims. This tradition likely influenced the Prester John legend, and may indeed have been a primary reference for the first documents purporting to have been composed by the powerful priest-king.

The incredible wealth purported to be in the possession of Prester John portrayed in European traveler accounts was, itself, an impetus to European voyages of exploration, exploitation, and expansion. The trickle of Asian and African merchandise across the Silk Road and the Sahara – gold, spices, silk, porcelain, and gemstones, among other trade commodities – were tangible evidence of the untold riches of the Orient. Surely the

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assumed extravagance of Prester John was a mere tip of the proverbial iceberg: Europeans need only find a route to the East, and they, too, could reap some of the seemingly endless supply of the treasures of the Three Indies. An explorer who could definitively locate for his sponsors the kingdom of Prester John would find himself richly rewarded, as would the monarch who underwrote such an excursion.

Though strictly a fictional character – setting aside the very real medieval rulers who may served as inspirations for the legendary priest-king - Prester John inspired the ambitions of Europeans as effectively (or perhaps more so) than any real personage would have been capable of doing. This mythical potentate played a pivotal role in Prince Henry the Navigator’s sponsorship of the epic voyages of discovery in the fifteenth century. Prester John continued to be a source of interest to European explorers and their sponsors at least to the end of the seventeenth century. The celebrated priest-king, by serving as a metaphorical magnet towards which Europeans were pulled, worked to significantly enhance the collective store of geographic knowledge in late medieval and early modern Europe.

The evolution of the image of the eastern Christian potentate that came to be known as Prester John was, perhaps, inevitable; the western Christian desire for a stalwart ally in the struggle against Islam was so strong that, assuming the Prester John legend had never materialized, European imaginations might still have created such a chimerical figure to fill the demand. Examples abound of this messianic longing in the western Christian tradition for a supra-human hero who can provide the necessary leadership in troubled times: the triumphant return of Christ, the Arthurian legend, the long-anticipated arrival of a Second Charlemagne, the Portuguese belief in a return of
Dom Sebastião, and perhaps even modern comic-book heroes like Superman. Prester John fit into this conscious longing for a champion who was able deliver people from the troubles of their times, and the idea of the legendary priest-king grew to fill a basic psycho-social need in human societies.

In an era of unprecedented globalization – and at a time when such subfields as “global history” or “world history” gain greater adherents and practitioners – the Prester John myth should occupy a significant position in the historical narrative. As one of the primary motivations for late medieval and early modern European explorers and exploiters, the legend of Prester John played an important role in the entry of Europeans into emerging world and regional markets. Arguably the course of modern capitalism would have followed a different path had not Europeans been convinced of the existence of Prester John, a ruler they believed possessed fantastic wealth, military might, and the political strength to help defeat the forces of Islam.

The historical achievements of European explorers such as Columbus, Gama, and Magellan undoubtedly broadened horizons for people aware of their exploits. However, it is a presentist deception that the tremendous expansion of geographical awareness by a relative handful of adventurous explorers somehow rapidly changed the collective European mentalité about Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Scammell recognized this historiographical fallacy in an insightful contribution to the dialogue of the intellectual history of European expansion:

Pigafetta's account of Magellan's circumnavigation, the superlative feat of sixteenth-century seamanship, was not published till 1800, and Drake's great voyage of 1577-80, though a version appears in Hakluyt, fared little better. Indeed much of the literature so frequently glossed in discussions of Europe's overseas expansion remained unpublished for centuries. Two distinguished pieces of Portuguese geographical writing, those of Barbosa and Pacheco, were not printed
till the 1800s, and the list [of “hidden” travel and exploration narratives] might easily be extended. ²

Related to the themes of global and world histories, the legend of Prester John ought to be emphasized in high school and college textbooks as both evidence of and a contributory factor to the heightening of tensions between the West and the Islamic world in the late medieval and early modern eras. Prester John, if found by European explorers, represented in the minds of Western European monarchs a valuable ally in the struggle against Islam, and the longevity of the legend likely owes a great deal to the collective desire in the West for such a geopolitical collaborator.

The analysis of late medieval and early modern illustrations of the mythical Prester John provides insights into the changing nature of the legendary priest-king as imagined by Europeans. Prester John evolved from being a monarch with decidedly European features into a figure much more exotic and with decidedly African features. However, European artists who created images of Prester John for texts continued to make clear distinctions between Prester John and other Africans, providing at least a few imagined details in their renderings that retained a distinctly European character for the imaginary monarch into the eighteenth century.

Unfortunately, there has been little scholarly research on the topic of Prester John in the past several decades. Even more disturbing, many high school and college textbooks simply omit any mention of the legend of Prester John from the narrative. When textbook publishers occasionally do include a brief mention about the legendary priest-king, the information offered is often misleading, erroneous, or incomplete in its

presentation. While we might speculate on the reasons why this important topic is given so little space in textbooks, it is more essential that the oversight is recognized and corrected.

It is the hope of the writer of this dissertation that the present study has helped move forward academic discussion of the legendary kingdom of Prester John. In particular, the traditional arbitrary decisions to assume the “death” of the mythical figure after certain sixteenth century European expeditions of discovery to Ethiopia need to be reevaluated, as European writers and mapmakers continued to be fixated on Prester John well into the eighteenth century. Moreover, it is not until the late seventeenth century that a significant number of Europeans began to question the legitimacy of the legendary monarch known as Prester John, and given the wealth of cartographic and textual evidence supporting the idea of continued belief in the Prester John myth, a revision of this errant historiographical assumption has been long overdue.
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Survey-Level History Textbooks


Appendix A

The Letter of Prester John to Emanuel Commemnos (1165)

John, priest by the almighty power of God and the strength of our Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, to his friend Emmanuel, Prince of Constantinople, greeting, wishing him health and the continued enjoyment of the Divine Favour.

It hath been reported to our Majesty that thou holdest our Excellency in esteem, and that the knowledge of our highness has reached thee.

Furthermore we have heard through our secretary that it was thy desire to send us some objects of art and interest, to gratify our righteous disposition. Being but human we take it in good part, and through our secretary we transmit to thee some of our articles in return. Now it is our desire and we will to know if thou holdest the true faith, and in all things adherest to our Lord Jesus Christ, for while we know that we are mortal, people regard thee as a god; still we know that thou art mortal, and subject to human infirmities.

If thou should have any desire to come into the kingdom of our majesty, we will place thee in the highest and most dignified position of our household, and thou mayest abundantly partake of all that pertains to us. Shouldst thou desire to return, thou shalt go laden with treasures. If indeed thou desirest to know wherein consists our great power, then believe without hesitation, that I, Prester John, who reign supreme, surpass in virtue,

riches and power all creatures under heaven. Seventy kings are our tributaries. I am a zealous Christian and universally protect the Christians of our empire, supporting them by our alms. We have determined to visit the Sepulchre of our Lord with a very large army, in accordance with the glory of our majesty to humble and chastise the enemies of the cross of Christ and to exalt his blessed name.

Honey flows in our land, and milk everywhere abounds. In one region there no poison exists and no noisy frog croaks, no scorpions are there, and no serpents creeping in the grass.

No venomous reptiles can exist there or use their deadly power. In one of the heathen provinces flows a river called the Indus, which, issuing from Paradise, extends its windings by various channels through all the province; and in it are found the emeralds, sapphires, carbuncles, topazes, chrysolites, onyxes, beryls, sardonyxes, and many other precious stones.

Between the sandy sea and the aforesaid mountains, is a stone in a plain, of incredible medical virtue which cures Christians or Christian candidates of whatever infirmities afflict them, in this manner. There is in the stone a mussel-shaped cavity, in which the water is always four inches deep, and this is kept by two holy and reverend old men. These ask the new-comers whether they are Christians, or do desire to be so, and

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2 A red cabachon cut gemstone, especially the red garnet.

3 A pale green mineral better known as olivine to modern readers.

4 A form of banded agate stone often cut and polished as a decorative gem.

5 This section is suggestive of both the fountain of youth, pursued by the likes of Ponce de Leon, and also the legend of the elixir of life, a mythical potion sought by alchemists and explorers in a wide variety of European, Central Asian, Indian, and Chinese guises. There are also certain parallels with the symbology surrounding the Christian ritual of baptism; see Paul A. Underwood, “The Fountain of Life in Manuscripts of the Gospels,” Dumbarton Oaks Papers 5 (1950), 41-138.
then if they desire the healing of the whole body, and if the answer is satisfactory, having laid aside their clothes they get into the shell; then if their profession is sincere, the water begins to increase and rises over their heads; this having taken place three times, the water returns to its usual height. Thus every one who enters, leaves it cured of whatsoever disease he had.

For gold, silver, precious stones, animals of every kind and the number of our people, we believe there is not our equal under heaven. There are no poor among us; we receive all strangers and wayfarers; thieves and robbers find no place among us, neither adultery nor avarice. When we go to war, we have carried before us fourteen golden crosses ornamented with jewels, in the place of banners, and each of these is followed by ten thousand mounted troopers and a hundred thousand infantry; besides those who are charged with the care of the baggage, carriages, and provisions.

Flattery finds no place; there is no division among us; our people have abundance of wealth; our horses are few and wretched. We believe we have no equal in the abundance of riches and the number of people. When we go out at ordinary times on horseback, our Majesty is preceded by a wooden cross, without decoration or gold or jewels, in order that we may always bear in mind the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Also a golden vase full of earth to remind us that our body must return to its original substance – the earth. There is also a silver vase filled with gold borne before us, that all may understand we are the Lord of Lords. Our magnificence abounds in all wealth, and surpasses that of India.

The palace in which our sublimity dwells, is after the pattern of that which the holy Thomas erected for the king Gundoforo, and resembles it in its various offices, and
everything in other parts of the edifice. The ceilings, pillars, and architraves are of rarest wood. The roof of the same palace indeed is of ebony, lest by any means it might be destroyed by fire or otherwise. At the extremities over the gables, are two golden apples in each of which are two carbuncles, that the gold may shine by day, and the carbuncles sparkle by night. The larger palace gates of sardonyxes, inlaid with snakes’ horn, so that nothing poisonous may enter. The others indeed are also of ebony. The windows are of crystal. The tables on which our courtiers eat are of gold and some of amethyst. The standards supporting the tables are some of ebony and some of amethyst. In front of the palace is the court in which our justice is accustomed to watch the combatants. The pavement is of onyx, in order that by virtue of the stones the courage of the combatants may be increased. In the aforesaid palace no light is used at night, but what is fed by balsam. The chamber in which our sublimity reposes is marvelously decorated with gold and stones of every kind.

At our table, thirty thousand men, besides occasional visitors are daily entertained; and all there partake of our bounty whether it be for horses or other expenses. The table made of the most precious emeralds is supported by four amethyst pillars; by virtue of which stone, no person sitting at the table can become inebriated.

Every month we are served in rotation by seven kings, sixty-two dukes, and two hundred and sixty-five counts and marquises, besides those who are sent on various missions in our interest.

Twelve archbishops sit on our right at table to meals every day, and twenty bishops on our left. The Patriarch of St. Thomas, the Metropolitan of Samarcand, and the
Bishop of Susa, where our glory resides and our imperial palace is, each in his turn is ever present with us.

If again thou askest how it is that the Creator of all having made us the most superpotential and most glorious over all mortals – does not give us a higher dignity or more excellent name than that of Priest (Prester), let not thy wisdom be surprised on this account, for this is the reason. We have many ecclesiastics in our retinue of more dignified name and office in the Church, and of more considerable standing than ours in the divine service. For our steward is a patriarch and king; our cup-bearer is an archbishop and king; our chamberlain is a bishop and a king; our archimandrite, that is chief pastor or master of the horse, is a king and abbot. Whereof our highness has not seen it repugnant to call himself by the same name and to distinguish himself by the order of which our court is full. And if we have chosen to be called by a lower name and inferior rank, it springs from humility. If indeed you can number the stars of heaven and the sands of the sea, then you may calculate the extent of our dominion and power.
Appendix B

Letter from Prester John to the Emperor of Rome and the King of France (1500)

Prester John, by the Grace of God most powerful king over all Christian kings, greetings to the Emperor of Rome and the King of France, our friends. We wish you to learn about us, our position, the government of our land, and our people and beasts. And since you say that our Greeks, or men of Grecian race, do not pray to God the way you do in your country, we let you know that we worship and believe in Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost, three persons in one Deity and one true God only. We attest and inform you by our letter, sealed with our seal, of the condition and character of our land and men. And if you desire something that we can do for you, ask us, for we shall do it gladly. In case you wish to come hither to our country, we shall make you on account of your good reputation our successors and we shall grant you vast lands, manors, and mansions.

Let it be known to you that we have the highest crown on earth as well as gold, silver, precious stones and strong fortresses, cities, towns, castles, and boroughs. We have under our sway forty-two kings who are all mighty and good Christians. And know that we maintain for the glory and love of Jesus Christ all the poor of our country, be they our men or foreigners.

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1 Translation of this French pamphlet by Vsevolod Slessarev, and this manuscriptis archived in the James Ford Bell Collection at the University of Minnesota. To access a facsimile of the manuscript, see Slessarev, Vsevolod. Prester John: The Letter and the Legend. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1959, 66.
Know also that we have promised and sworn in our good faith to conquer the Sepulcher of our Lord and the whole Promised Land. And if you wish and it pleases God, we shall have it; but may you too display the great and steadfast valor which is yours, since we were told of your true and loyal courage. But there are other Frenchmen among you of your lineage and from your retinue who hold with the Saracens. You confide to them and trust them that they should and will help you, but they are the false and treacherous Hospitalers.² Know that we have killed them in our country as it should be done with those who turn against the faith.

Our land is divided into four parts, for there are so many Indias. In Greater India lies the body of the Apostle Saint Thomas for whom our Lord has wrought more miracles than for the [other] saints who are in heaven. And this India is toward the East, for it is near the deserted Babylon and also near the tower called Babel. In another province toward the North there is a great abundance of bread, wine, meat, and everything necessary for the human body.

There are in our country elephants and other animals called dromedaries and also white horses and wild bulls of seven horns, white bears, and the strangest lions of red, green, black, and blue color. We also have wild asses with two little horns, wild hares as big as sheep, and swift horses with two little horns who gallop faster than any wild animal. You should also know that we have birds called griffins who can easily carry an ox or a horse into their nest to feed their young. We have still another kind of birds who rule over all other fowl in the world. They are of fiery color, their wings are as sharp as

² Slessarev suggested that the 1500 pamphlet used a late 13th or early 14th century copy of the letter as the textual source, since the campaign by Philip the Fair against the Knights Templar was waged between 1285 and 1314.
razors, and they are called Yllerion. In the whole world there are but two of them. They live for sixty years, at the end of which they fly away to plunge into the sea. But first they hatch two or three eggs for forty days till the young ones come out. Then the old pair, father and mother, take off and go and drown themselves in the sea, as was said before. And all the birds who meet them escort them until they are drowned. And when this has happened, the companions return and they go to the fledglings and feed them till they grow up and can fly and provide for themselves. Likewise, you should know that we have other birds called tigers who are so strong and bold that they lift and kill with ease an armored man together with his horse.

Know that in one province of our company is a wilderness and that there live horned men who have but one eye in front and three or four in back. There are also women who look similar. We have in our country still another kind of men who feed only on raw flesh of men and women and do not hesitate to die. And when one of them passes away, be it their father or mother, they gobble him up without cooking him. They hold that it is good and natural to eat human flesh and they do it for the redemption of their sins. This nation is cursed and it is called Gog and Magog and there are more of them than of all other peoples. With the coming of the Antichrist they will spread over the whole world, for they are his friends and allies. This was the people that enclosed the King Alexander of Macedonia and put him into prison from which he escaped. But God will send upon them lightning and scorching fire which will burn and disperse them along with the Antichrist, and in such a way they will be destroyed and routed. None the less we take many of them with us into war, whenever we wish to wage one, and we give

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3 Also spelled “allerion,” these mythical creatures were similar to eagles though lacking beak and wings. Yllerions often found their way on medieval heraldry.
them license and permission to eat our enemies, so that out of a thousand not a single one remains who is not devoured and consumed. But later we send them home, because, if they were to stay with us longer, they would eat us all. We have in our country also other men who have hoofed legs like horses and at the back of their heels they have four strong and sharp claws with which they can fight in such a way that no armor can withstand them; and yet they are good Christians and will willingly till their lands and ours and pay us a big tribute.

In another region of the wilderness we have a country that extends for forty-two days’ journey and it is called the Great Feminie. Do not think that it is in the lands of the Saracens, for the one we are talking about is in our country. In that land there are three queens and many other ladies who hold their lands from them. And when these three queens wish to wage war, each of them leads with her one hundred thousand armed women, not counting those who drive the carts, horses, and elephants with the supplies and food. And know that they fight bravely like men. No male can stay with them over nine days, during which he can carouse and amuse himself and make them conceive. But he should not overstay, for in such a case he will die. This land is encircled by a river called Cyson that flows from the terrestrial paradise and is so wide that nobody can cross it except in big boats or ships.

Know that between this land [and the river is a country] called Piconye which is small and extends only for ten days’ journey in length and seven in breadth. Men are here as small as seven-year-old children and their horses are as small as sheep, and yet they are good Christians and willing workers. Nobody wages war on them except the birds who come each year when they have to harvest and to gather grapes. Then the king
of this country equips himself to the best of his ability against the said birds and they have a dreadful carnage. Later, however, the birds return.

We have in our country bowmen who from the waist up are men, but whose lower part is that of a horse. They carry in their hands bows and arrows and they can pull harder than any human being and they live on raw flesh. Some of our courtiers capture them and keep them chained and people come to see this great marvel.

There are in our land also unicorns who have in front a single horn of which there are three kinds: green, black, and white.\(^4\) Sometimes they kill lions. But a lion kills them in a very subtle way. When a unicorn is tired it lies down by a tree. The lion goes then behind it and when the unicorn wants to strike him with his horn, it dashes into the tree with such force that it cannot free itself. Then the lion kills it.

In another region of the wilderness there are men who used to be sixty cubits tall but who are now only twenty, and they cannot leave the desert, since it would displease God, for once they were outside, they could easily vanquish everybody.

You should also know that in our country there is a bird called the phoenix which is the most beautiful in the world. In the whole universe there is but one such bird. It lives for a hundred years and then it rises toward the sky so close to the sun that its wings catch fire. Then it descends into the nest and burns itself; and yet out of the ashes there grows a worm which at the end of a hundred days becomes again as beautiful a bird as it was ever before.

\(^4\) It is of some interest that the unicorns depicted in this account can be found in a variety of colors. In Western tradition the unicorn tends to be a white-colored creature, while the legendary Chinese Chi-lin is multi-hued. See Elmer G. Suhr, “An Interpretation of the Unicorn,” *Folklore* 75:2 (Summer, 1964), 91-109. See page 249P.
In our land there is also an abundance of bread, wine, meat, and of everything that is good for the human body. Know also that no venomous creature can enter certain parts of our country.

Between us and the Saracens there flows a river called Ydonis which comes from the terrestrial paradise and is full of precious stones. It flows through or land mostly in small and big arms and many precious stones are found there, such as emeralds, sapphires, jaspe, calcedoines, rubies, carbuncles, “scabasses,” and many other precious stones which I have not mentioned; and of each we know its name and its magic power.

There is within our land an herb called permanent. Whoever carries it with him can conjure the devil and question him as to who he is, where he is going, what he is doing on earth, and make him speak. Because of this, the devil does not dare to stay in our land.

Know also that in our country there grows wild peppers amidst trees and serpents. When it becomes ripe, we send our people to gather it. They put the woods on fire and everything burns, but when the fire has died out, they make great heaps of pepper and serpents and they put the pepper together and carry it later to a barn, wash it in two or three waters, and let it dry in the sun. In this way it becomes black, hard, and biting.

Near this region there is a fountain and whoever drinks of its water three times on an empty stomach will have no sickness for thirty years; and when he has drunk of it, he will feel as if he has eaten the best meat and spices, for it is full of God’s grace. A person who can bathe in this fountain, be he of a hundred or thousand years, will regain the age of thirty-two. Know that we were born and blessed in the womb of our mother five hundred and sixty-two years ago and since then we have bathed in the fountain six times.
Let it be known to you that the Sandy Sea\textsuperscript{5} originates in our country and that it has a swift surf and produces frightful waves. Nobody can cross it, no matter how one tries, except us, for we let ourselves be carried by the griffins, as Alexander did when he was about to conquer the enchanted castle. Not far from this sea there flows a river in which one finds many precious stones and herbs that are good for many medicines.

Between us and the Jews there runs a river full of precious stones and it descends so swiftly that nobody can cross it except on Saturday when it stands still; and whatever it encounters, it carries into the Sandy Sea. We have to protect this crossing, for we have on this frontier forty-two castles which are the strangest and most beautiful in the world and many men to defend them, to wit ten thousand knights, six thousand crossbowmen and fifteen thousand archers, and forty thousand troopers who guard the aforesaid passages, so that, if the great King of Israel would come with his men, he could not get across with his Jews, who are twice as numerous as the Christians, but not as the Saracens, for they hold two thirds of the world. Know that the great King of Israel has under him three hundred kings and four thousand princes, dukes, and counts, all of them Jews and obedient to him. And if the Jews could cross this passage, all the Christians and Saracens would be lost.\textsuperscript{6}

On each Saturday we let some eight hundred or thousand Jews come across for the purpose of trade. They do not, however, enter our strongholds, but exchange the wares outside, because we do not trust them. They buy exclusively with ingots of gold

\textsuperscript{5} This may be a reference to Chaucer, who noted the presence of “the drye see” in \textit{Book of the Duchesse} (II. 1024-29): “Go hoodles to the drye see / And come hoom by the Carrenare.” See John Livingston Lowes, “The Dry Sea and the Carrenare,” \textit{Modern Philology} 3(1) (Jun., 1905), 1-46.

\textsuperscript{6} Considerable evidence survives related to the recurrent idea that the King of Israel was believed to be a superhuman being with a divine nature. See Adela Yarbro Collins, “Mark and His Readers: The Son of God among Jews,” \textit{The Harvard Theological Review} 92:4 (Oct., 1999), 393-408.
and silver, for they do not have real money. After they have made their purchases, they return home. Know also that we have forty-two castles which are not farther apart than a crossbow shot.

Let it be known to you, that one league from there we have a city called the Great Orionde which is the strongest and most beautiful in the world. One of our kings guards it and he collects tribute from the great King of Israel, for he owes us every year two hundred horses loaded with precious stones, gold and silver, an addition to the expenses incurred in this city and in the aforesaid castles. Know that when we make war on them, we kill all those who happen to be in our country and because of this they do not dare to stir, not attack us. Notice that the Jewish women are the most beautiful and passionate in the world.

Know that near the Sandy River there is the Sandy Sea and nobody can cross it, except when a strong wind spreads close to the ground, then no one can enter it. Yet a person should hurry to return, for if he tarries, he could remain in the sea. And every piece of debris that comes out of it turns into precious stones; but they cannot be sold before we have seen them, and if we wish to have them, we can buy them at prices set by our merchants.

In another region of our land there is a mountain on which nobody can dwell because of its great heat. Certain worms who cannot live save in fire sustain themselves there. Near this mountain we keep constantly forty thousand men who maintain a great fire. And when these worms sense the heat of fire and come out of the earth, they enter the flames and spin a thread similar to the one made by the silkworms. Out of this thread we make garments for us and our ladies and we wear them at the great holidays of the
year. Whenever we wish to wash them, we put them into the fire whence they come clean and fresh.

Know also that no Christian king has as many treasures as we do, because nobody can be poor in our country who wants to earn his living. Remember also that St. Thomas performs more miracles than all the saints of paradise, for he preaches personally once a year in his church to everybody, and he also preaches in a palace, as you will hear.

Let it be known to you that in another region of our country there are strange men who have human bodies, but heads of dogs. It is impossible to understand their language, yet they are good fishermen, since they can enter the deepest sea and stay there for a day without emerging. They catch as many fish as they desire, and they carry them back to their subterranean houses. We, however, mark the place where they put them and take as many as we want. These men bring woe on our wild beasts, for they eat them and they fight against the archers and battle them fiercely.

In our country there are also birds of a more hot-blooded nature than elsewhere. When the time of hatching comes, they lay twenty-one eggs at the bottom of a sea, and out of them come birds and they fly away. We catch many of them since they taste good when they are young. And if a man’s or woman’s health is failing and they eat of these birds, their vigor returns to them and they become as strong as before, or even stronger.

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7 The author refers here to *cynocephalus*, a mythical creature that remained part of popular lore among Europeans about distant lands until well into the sixteenth century. Hartmann Schedel’s *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493) is a contemporaneous document that offered readers detailed information about the supposed characteristics of *cynocephali*.

8 This creature is suggestive of the legendary Halcyon, a bird in Greek mythology that may be associated with the kingfisher. It was believed that the halcyon nested on the sea, which it calmed in order to lay its eggs in a floating nest. See Elaine Fanthom, “Ovid’s Ceyx and Alcyone: The Metamorphosis of a Myth,” *Phoenix* 33:4 (Winter, 1979), 330-345.
There grows in our country also the tree of life from which the holy oil is coming. This tree is completely dry and a serpent is guarding and watching it day and night, all the year round, except on St. John’s day, when it is fast asleep, and this is the time when we approach it. During the whole year it yields but three pounds which gather drop by drop. When we have come close to the holy oil, we take it and go back cautiously for fear that the serpent may pursue us. This tree is only a day’s journey from the earthly paradise. When the serpent awakens, it becomes angry and hisses so loudly that it can be heard a day’s march away. It is three times as big as a horse and it has nine heads and a pair of wings. And after we have crossed the sea, it turns around, while we proceed and take the holy oil to the Patriarch of St. Thomas and he consecrates it and anoints us Christians with it. The rest we send to the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and he in turn sends it to the Pope of Rome who blesses it and adds to it olive oil and sends it to all Christians beyond the sea.

There are no thieves in our country, neither among our citizens, nor among the foreigners, for God and St. Thomas would have confounded them, while we would have put them to death.

Let it be known to you that we have swift horses which can carry a knight in full armor for three or four days without taking food.

And whenever we go to war, we have fourteen kings, clad in garments of gold and silver, carry in front of us fourteen ensigns adorned with sundry precious stones. Other kings who come behind carry richly decorated banners of silk.

Know that in front of us there march forty thousand clerics and an equal number of knights, the come two hundred thousand men on foot, not counting the wagons with
provisions or the elephants and camels which carry arms and ammunition. And when we leave for war, we entrust our country to the Patriarch of St. Thomas.

Yet when we ride out in peace, we let a simple wooden cross be borne before us, so that we are reminded of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Know that at the gates of each of our cities there are three crosses made of wood for people to worship the Holy Rood.\(^9\)

Likewise when we ride out in peace we order a vessel full of earth to be carried as a sign that we are dust and unto dust we shall return; another vessel full of gold is borne to show that we are the most powerful and noble king.

Let it be known to you that nobody ion our land dares to commit the sin of lechery, for at once he would be burned, because the sacrament of marriage has been ordained by God; nor does anybody dare to lie in our country, for he would be hanged [immediately].

You should know that each year we visit in the desert the body of St. Daniel, the prophet.\(^10\) On this occasion we take with us ten thousand clerics and an equal number of knights and two hundred towers built on the elephants which also protect us from the seven-headed dragons. Know also that in this desert there are the finest dates that grow on trees and they are tasty, green and ripe as well in winter as in summer. The desert stretches for eight and sixty days’ journey and there live two Patriarchs of St. Thomas who sit at the table in front of us, for they have the authority of the Pope of Rome. We have also as many abbots as there are days in a year taken twice and added fifteen. Each of them comes once during the year to chant at the altar of St. Thomas. We also sing there on the annual feats days, and on account of this we are called Prester John, for we

\(^9\) The cross upon which Christ was crucified.

\(^10\) Likely Daniel, the central character in the *Book of Daniel*, and not St. Daniel the Stylite.
are a priest because of sacrificing at the altar, and we are a king because we are just and upright.

Know that I had been blessed before I was born, for God has sent an angel to my father who told him to build a palace full of God’s grace and a chamber of paradise for the child to come, who was to be the greatest king on earth and to live for a long time. And whoever stays in the palace will never suffer hunger, thirst, or death. When my father had woke up from his slumber, he was overly joyful and he began to build the palace which you will see.

First of all, its walls are of crystal, the ceiling above is of precious stones, and it is adorned with stars similar to those of the sky, and the floor is also of crystal. There are no windows or doors inside this palace and inside it has twenty-four columns of gold and various precious stones. We stay there during the big holidays of the year and in the midst of it St. Thomas preaches to the people. And inside our palace there is [water] and the best wine on earth, and whoever drinks of it has no desire for worldly things, and nobody knows where the [water] goes or whence it comes.

There is still another great marvel in our palace, for no food is served in it except on a tray, grill, or trencher that hangs from a column, so that when we sit at a table and wish to eat, the food is placed before us by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Know that all the scribes on earth could not report or describe the riches of our palace and our chapel. Everything we have written to you is as true as there is God, and for nothing in the world would we lie, since God and St. Thomas would confound us and deprive us of our title.
If you desire from us something that we can fulfill, do not hesitate to ask, for we shall do it gladly. We beg you to keep in mind the holy pilgrimage, and may it take place soon, and may you be brave and of great courage, and pray, do not forget to put to death those treacherous Templars and pagans and, please, send us an answer with the envoys who brought the presents. We entreat the King of France to greet from us all loyal Christians beyond the sea and to send us some valiant knight of noblest French blood. We pray to our Lord to keep you in the grace of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Written in our holy palace in the year five hundred and seven since our birth.

Here end the sundry tales of men, beasts, and birds in the land of Prester John.
Appendix C

The Account of Benjamin of Tudela of the Kofar-al-Turak

Thence it takes twenty-eight days to the mountains of Naisabur by the river Gozan. And there are men of Israel in the land of Persia who say that in the mountains of Naisabur four of the tribes of Israel dwell, namely, the tribe of Dan, the tribe of Zebulun, the tribe of Asher, and the tribe of Naphtali, who were included in the first captivity of Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, as it is written (2 Kings xviii.11): "And he put them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan and, in the cities of the Medes."

The extent of their land is twenty days' journey, and they have cities and large villages in the mountains; the river Gozan forms the boundary on the one side. They are not under the rule of the Gentiles, but they have a prince of their own, whose name is R. Joseph Amarkala the Levite. There are scholars among them. And they sow and reap and go forth to war as far as the land of Cush by way of the desert.

They are in league with the Kofar-al-Turak, who worship the wind and live in the wilderness, and who do not eat bread, nor drink wine, but live on raw uncooked meat. They have no noses, and in lieu thereof they have two small holes, through which they breathe. They eat animals both clean and unclean, and they are very friendly towards the Israelites. Fifteen years ago they overran the country of Persia with a large army and took

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1Transcription from The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary. Translated and edited by Marcus Nathan Adler. New York: Philipp Feldheim, 1907.
the city of Rayy. they smote it with the edge of the sword, took all the spoil thereof, and returned by way of the wilderness. Such an invasion had not been known in the land of Persia for many years. When the king of Persia heard thereof his anger was kindled against them, and he said, "Not in my days nor in the days of my fathers did an army sally forth from this wilderness. Now I will go and cut off their name from the earth." A proclamation was made throughout his Empire, and he assembled all his armies; and he sought a guide who might show him the way to their encampment. And a certain man said that he would show him the way, as he was one of them. And the king promised that he would enrich him if he did so. And the king asked him as to what provisions they would require for the march through the wilderness. And he replied, "Take with you bread and wine for fifteen days, for you will find no sustenance by the way, till you have reached their land." And they did so, and marched through the wilderness for fifteen days, but they found nothing at all. And their food began to give out, so that man and beast were dying of hunger and thirst. Then the king called the guide, and said to him, "Where is your promise to us that you would find our adversaries?"

To which the other replied, "I have mistaken the way." And the king was wroth, and commanded that his head should be struck off. And the king further gave orders throughout the camp that every man who had any food should divide it with his neighbour. And they consumed everything they had including their beasts. And after a further thirteen days' march they reached the mountains of Naisabur, where Jews lived. They came there on the Sabbath, and encamped in the gardens and plantations and by the springs of water which are by the side of the river Gozan. Now it was the time of the ripening of the fruit, and they ate and consumed everything. No man came
forth to them, but on the mountains they saw cities and many towers.

Then the king commanded two of his servants to go and inquire of the people who lived in the mountains, and to cross the river either in boats or by swimming. So they searched and found a large bridge, on which there were three towers, but the gate of the bridge was locked. And on the other side of the bridge was a great city. Then they shouted in front of the bridge till a man came forth and asked them what they wanted and who they were. But they did not understand him till an interpreter came who understood their language. And when he asked them, they said, "We are the servants of the king of Persia, and we have come to ask who you are, and whom you serve."

To which the other replied: "We are Jews; we have no king and no Gentile prince, but a Jewish prince rules over us." They then questioned him with regard to the infidels, the sons of Ghuz of the Kofar-al-Turak, and he answered: "Truly they are in league with us, and he who seeks to do them harm seeks our harm." Then they went their way, and told the king of Persia, who was much alarmed. And on a certain day the Jews asked him to join combat with them, but he answered: "I am not come to fight you, but the Kofar-al-Turak, my enemy, and if you fight against me I will be avenged on you by killing all the Jews in my Empire; I know that you are stronger than I am in this place, and my army has come out of this great wilderness starving and athirst. Deal kindly with me and do not fight against me, but leave me to engage with the Kofar-al-Turak, my enemy, and sell me also the provisions which I require for myself and my army." The Jews then took counsel together, and resolved to propitiate the king on account of the Jews who were in exile in his Empire. Then the king entered their land with his army, and stayed there fifteen days. And they showed him much honour, and
also sent a dispatch to the Kofar-al-Turak their allies, reporting the matter to them. 

Thereupon the latter occupied the mountain passes in force with a large army composed of all those who dwelt in that desert, and when the king of Persia went forth to fight with them, they placed themselves in battle array against him. The Kofar-al-Turak army was victorious and slew many of the Persian host, and the king of Persia fled with only a few followers to his own country.
CHAPTER XLVII - OF CHINGHIS, AND HOW HE BECAME THE FIRST KAAN OF THE TARTARS

Originally the Tartars dwelt in the north on the borders of CHORCHA. Their country was one of great plains; and there were no towns or villages in it, but excellent pasture-lands, with great rivers and many sheets of water; in fact it was a very fine and extensive region. But there was no sovereign in the land. They did, however, pay tax and tribute to a great prince who was called in their tongue UNC CAN, the same that we call Prester John, him in fact about whose great dominion all the world talks. The tribute he had of them was one beast out of every ten, and also a tithe of all their other gear. Now it came to pass that the Tartars multiplied exceedingly. And when Prester John saw how great a people they had become, he began to fear that he should have trouble from them. So he made a scheme to distribute them over sundry countries, and sent one of his Barons to carry this out. When the Tartars became aware of this they took it much amiss, and with one consent they left their country and went off across a desert to a distant region towards the north, where Prester John could not get at them to annoy them. Thus they revolted from his authority and paid him tribute no longer. And so things continued for a time...

1 The translation used in this appendix is by Henry Yule, *The Travels of Marco Polo — Volumes 1 and 2* (London, 1900).
Now in the year of Christ 1200 [Chinggis Khan] sent an embassy to Prester John, and desired to have his daughter to wife. But when Prester John heard that Chinghis Kaan demanded his daughter in marriage he waxed very wroth, and said to the Envoys, "What impudence is this, to ask my daughter to wife! Wist he not well that he was my liegeman and serf? Get ye back to him and tell him that I had liever set my daughter in the fire than give her in marriage to him, and that he deserves death at my hand, rebel and traitor that he is!" So he bade the Envoys begone at once, and never come into his presence again. The Envoys, on receiving this reply, departed straightway, and made haste to their master, and related all that Prester John had ordered them to say, keeping nothing back.

CHAPTER XLVIII - HOW CHINGHIS MUSTERED HIS PEOPLE TO MARCH AGAINST PRESTER JOHN

When Chinghis Kaan heard the brutal message that Prester John had sent him, such rage seized him that his heart came nigh to bursting within him, for he was a man of a very lofty spirit. At last he spoke, and that so loud that all who were present could hear him: "Never more might he be prince if he took not revenge for the brutal message of Prester John, and such revenge that insult never in this world was so dearly paid for. And before long Prester John should know whether he were his serf or no!"

So then he mustered all his forces, and levied such a host as never before was seen or heard of, sending word to Prester John to be on his defence. And when Prester John had sure tidings that Chinghis was really coming against him with such a multitude, he still professed to treat it as a jest and a trifle, for, quoth he, "these be no soldiers." Natheless he marshalled his forces and mustered his people, and made great preparations,
in order that if Chinghis did come, he might take him and put him to death. In fact he marshalled such an host of many different nations that it was a world's wonder.

And so both sides gat them ready to battle. And why should I make a long story of it? Chinghis Kaan with all his host arrived at a vast and beautiful plain which was called Tanduc, belonging to Prester John, and there he pitched his camp; and so great was the multitude of his people that it was impossible to number them. And when he got tidings that Prester John was coming, he rejoiced greatly, for the place afforded a fine and ample battle-ground, so he was right glad to tarry for him there, and greatly longed for his arrival. But now leave we Chinghis and his host, and let us return to Prester John and his people.

CHAPTER XLIX - HOW PRESTER JOHN MARCHED TO MEET CHINGHIS

Now the story goes that when Prester John became aware that Chinghis with his host was marching against him, he went forth to meet him with all his forces, and advanced until he reached the same plain of Tanduc, and pitched his camp over against that of Chinghis Kaan at a distance of 20 miles. And then both armies remained at rest for two days that they might be fresher and heartier for battle. So when the two great hosts were pitched on the plains of Tanduc as you have heard, Chinghis Kaan one day summoned before him his astrologers, both Christians and Saracens, and desired them to let him know which of the two hosts would gain the battle, his own or Prester John's. The Saracens tried to ascertain, but were unable to give a true answer; the Christians, however, did give a true answer, and showed manifestly beforehand how the event should be. For they got a cane and split it lengthwise, and laid one half on this side and one half on that, allowing no one to touch the pieces. And one piece of cane they called “Chinghis Kaan,”
and the other piece they called “Prester John.” And then they said to Chinghis: "Now mark! and you will see the event of the battle, and who shall have the best of it; for whose cane soever shall get above the other, to him shall victory be.” He replied that he would fain see it, and bade them begin. Then the Christian astrologers read a Psalm out of the Psalter, and went through other incantations. And lo! whilst all were beholding, the cane that bore the name of Chinghis Kaan, without being touched by anybody, advanced to the other that bore the name of Prester John, and got on the top of it. When the Prince saw that he was greatly delighted, and seeing how in this matter he found the Christians to tell the truth, he always treated them with great respect, and held them for men of truth for ever after.

CHAPTER L - THE BATTLE BETWEEN CHINGHIS KAAN AND PRESTER JOHN

And after both sides had rested well those two days, they armed for the fight and engaged in desperate combat; and it was the greatest battle that ever was seen. The numbers that were slain on both sides were very great, but in the end Chinghis Kaan obtained the victory. And in the battle Prester John was slain. And from that time forward, day by day, his kingdom passed into the hands of Chinghis Kaan till the whole was conquered.

CHAPTER LIX - CONCERNING THE PROVINCE OF TENDUC, AND THE DESCENDANTS OF PRESTER JOHN

Tenduc is a province which lies towards the east, and contains numerous towns and villages; among which is the chief city, also called TENDUC. The king of the province is of the lineage of Prester John, George by name, and he holds the land under the Great Kaan; not that he holds anything like the whole of what Prester John possessed.
It is a custom, I may tell you, that these kings of the lineage of Prester John always obtain to wife either daughters of the Great Kaan or other princesses of his family.

In this province is found the stone from which Azure\(^2\) is made. It is obtained from a kind of vein in the earth, and is of very fine quality. There is also a great manufacture of fine camlets of different colours from camel's hair. The people get their living by their cattle and tillage, as well as by trade and handicraft.

The rule of the province is in the hands of the Christians, as I have told you; but there are also plenty of Idolaters and worshippers of Mahommet. And there is also here a class of people called “Argons,” which is as much as to say in French “Guasmul,” or, in other words, sprung from two different races: to wit, of the race of the Idolaters of Tenduc and of that of the worshippers of Mahommet. They are handsomer men than the other natives of the country, and having more ability, they come to have authority; and they are also capital merchants.

You must know that it was in this same capital city of Tenduc that Prester John had the seat of his government when he ruled over the Tartars, and his heirs still abide there; for, as I have told you, this King George is of his line, in fact, he is the sixth in descent from Prester John.

Here also is what we call the country of GOG and MAGOG; they, however, call it UNG and MUNGUL, after the names of two races of people that existed in that Province before the migration of the Tartars. Ung was the title of the people of the country, and Mungul a name sometimes applied to the Tartars.

And when you have ridden seven days eastward through this province you get

\(^2\) Likely \textit{Lapis armenus}, popularly known as the “Armenian stone.”
near the provinces of Cathay. You find throughout those seven days' journey plenty of towns and villages, the inhabitants of which are Mahommetans, but with a mixture also of Idolaters and Nestorian Christians. They get their living by trade and manufactures; weaving those fine cloths of gold which are called Nasich and Naques, besides silk stuffs of many other kinds. For just as we have cloths of wool in our country, manufactured in a great variety of kinds, so in those regions they have stuffs of silk and gold in like variety.

All this region is subject to the Great Kaan. There is a city you come to called SINDACHU, where they carry on a great many crafts such as provide for the equipment of the Emperor's troops. In a mountain of the province there is a very good silver mine, from which much silver is got: the place is called YDIFU. The country is well stocked with game, both beast and bird.

CHAPTER XXXVIII - CONCERNING THE CASTLE OF CAICHU

On leaving Pianfu you ride two days westward, and come to the noble castle of CAICHU, which was built in time past by a king of that country, whom they used to call the GOLDEN KING, and who had there a great and beautiful palace. There is a great hall of this palace, in which are pourtrayed all the ancient kings of the country, done in gold and other beautiful colours, and a very fine sight they make. Each king in succession as he reigned added to those pictures.

This Golden King was a great and potent Prince, and during his stay at this place there used to be in his service none but beautiful girls, of whom he had a great number in his Court. When he went to take the air about the fortress, these girls used to draw him

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3 This section begins the material related to Prester John that is located in Volume 2 of Marco Polo’s Travels.
about in a little carriage which they could easily move, and they would also be in attendance on the King for everything pertaining to his convenience or pleasure.

Now I will tell you a pretty passage that befell between the Golden King and Prester John, as it was related by the people of the Castle. It came to pass, as they told the tale, that this Golden King was at war with Prester John. And the King held a position so strong that Prester John was not able to get at him or to do him any scathe; wherefore he was in great wrath. So seventeen gallants belonging to Prester John's Court came to him in a body, and said that, an he would, they were ready to bring him the Golden King alive. His answer was, that he desired nothing better, and would be much bounden to them if they would do so.

So when they had taken leave of their Lord and Master Prester John, they set off together, this goodly company of gallants, and went to the Golden King, and presented themselves before him, saying that they had come from foreign parts to enter his service. And he answered by telling them that they were right welcome, and that he was glad to have their service, never imagining that they had any ill intent. And so these mischievous squires took service with the Golden King; and served him so well that he grew to love them dearly.

And when they had abode with that King nearly two years, conducting themselves like persons who thought of anything but treason, they one day accompanied the King on a pleasure party when he had very few else along with him: for in those gallants the King had perfect trust, and thus kept them immediately about his person. So after they had crossed a certain river that is about a mile from the castle, and saw that they were alone
with the King, they said one to another that now was the time to achieve that they had come for. Then they all incontinently drew, and told the King that he must go with them and make no resistance, or they would slay him. The King at this was in alarm and great astonishment, and said: "How then, good my sons, what thing is this ye say? and whither would ye have me go?" They answered, and said: "You shall come with us, will ye: nill ye, to Prester John our Lord."

CHAPTER XXXIX - HOW PRESTER JOHN TREATED THE GOLDEN KING HIS PRISONER

And on this the Golden King was so sorely grieved that he was like to die. And he said to them: "Good, my sons, for God's sake have pity and compassion upon me. Ye wot well what honourable and kindly entertainment ye have had in my house; and now ye would deliver me into the hands of mine enemy! In sooth, if ye do what ye say, ye will do a very naughty and disloyal deed, and a right villainous." But they answered only that so it must be, and away they had him to Prester John their Lord.

And when Prester John beheld the King he was right glad, and greeted him with something like a malison. The King answered not a word, as if he wist not what it behoved him to say. So Prester John ordered him to be taken forth straightway, and to be put to look after cattle, but to be well looked after himself also. So they took him and set him to keep cattle. This did Prester John of the grudge he bore the King, to heap contumely on him, and to show what a nothing he was, compared to himself.

And when the King had thus kept cattle for two years, Prester John sent for him, and treated him with honour, and clothed him in rich robes, and said to him: "Now Sir King, art thou satisfied that thou wast in no way a man to stand against me?" "Truly, my
good Lord, I know well and always did know that I was in no way a man to stand against thee." And when he had said this Prester John replied: "I ask no more; but henceforth thou shalt be waited on and honourably treated." So he caused horses and harness of war to be given him, with a goodly train, and sent him back to his own country. And after that he remained ever friendly to Prester John, and held fast by him.
Appendix E

Sir John Mandeville on Prester John

From thence go men by many journeys through the land of Prester John, the great Emperor of Ind. And men clepe his realm the isle of Pentexoire.

Of the Royal Estate of Prester John. And of a rich man that made a marvellous castle and cleped it Paradise; and of his subtlety

This emperor, Prester John, holds full great land, and hath many full noble cities and good towns in his realm, and many great diverse isles and large. For all the country of Ind is devised in isles for the great floods that come from Paradise, that depart all the land in many parts. And also in the sea he hath full many isles. And the best city in the Isle of Pentexoire is Nyse, that is a full royal city and a noble, and full rich.

This Prester John hath under him many kings and many isles and many diverse folk of diverse conditions. And this land is full good and rich, but not so rich as is the land of the great Chan. For the merchants come not thither so commonly for to buy merchandises, as they do in the land of the great Chan, for it is too far to travel to. And on that other part, in the Isle of Cathay, men find all manner thing that is need to man - cloths of gold, of silk, of spicery and all manner avoirdupois. And therefore, albeit that men have greater cheap in the Isle of Prester John, natheles, men dread the long way and the great perils in the sea in those parts.

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For in many places of the sea be great rocks of stones of the adamant, that of his proper nature draweth iron to him. And therefore there pass no ships that have either bonds or nails of iron within them. And if there do, anon the rocks of the adamant draw them to them, that never they may go thence. I myself have seen afar in that sea, as though it had been a great isle full of tree, and buscaylle, full of thorns and briars, great plenty. And the shipmen told us, that all that was of ships that were drawn thither by the adamant, for the iron that was in them. And of the rotten-ness, and other thing that was within the ships, grew such buscaylle, and thorns and briars and green grass, and such manner of thing; and of the masts and the sail-yards; it seemed a great wood or a grove. And such rocks be in many places thereabout. And therefore dare not the merchants pass there, but if they know well the passages, or else that they have good lodesmen.

And also they dread the long way. And therefore they go to Cathay, for it is more nigh. And yet it is not so nigh, but that men must be travelling by sea and land, eleven months or twelve, from Genoa or from Venice, or he come to Cathay. And yet is the land of Prester John more far by many dreadful journeys.

And the merchants pass by the kingdom of Persia, and go to a city that is Clept Hermes, for Hermes the philosopher founded it. And after that they pass an arm of the sea, and then they go to another city that is clept Golbache. And there they find merchandises, and of popinjays, as great plenty as men find here of geese. And if they will pass further, they may go sikerly enough. In that country is but little wheat or barley, and therefore they eat rice and honey and milk and cheese and fruit.
This Emperor Prester John taketh always to his wife the daughter of the great Chan; and the great Chan also, in the same wise, the daughter of Prester John. For these two be the greatest lords under the firmament.

In the land of Prester John be many diverse things and many precious stones, so great and so large, that men make of them vessels, as platters, dishes and cups. And many other marvels be there, that it were too cumbrous and too long to put it in scripture of books; but of the principal isles and of his estate and of his law, I shall tell you some part.

This Emperor Prester John is Christian, and a great part of his country also. But yet, they have not all the articles of our faith as we have. They believe well in the Father, in the Son and in the Holy Ghost. And they be full devout and right true one to another. And they set not by no barretts, ne by cautels, nor of no deceits.

And he hath under him seventy-two provinces, and in every province is a king. And these kings have kings under them, and all be tributaries to Prester John. And he hath in his lordships many great marvels.

For in his country is the sea that men clepe the Gravelly Sea, that is all gravel and sand, without any drop of water, and it ebbeth and floweth in great waves as other seas do, and it is never still ne in peace, in no manner season. And no man may pass that sea by navy, ne by no manner of craft, and therefore may no man know what land is beyond that sea. And albeit that it have no water, yet men find therein and on the banks full good fish of other manner of kind and shape, than men find in any other sea, and they be of right good taste and delicious to man’s meat.
And a three journeys long from that sea be great mountains, out of the which goeth out a great flood that cometh out of Paradise. And it is full of precious stones, without any drop of water, and it runneth through the desert on that one side, so that it maketh the sea gravelly; and it beareth into that sea, and there it endeth. And that flome runneth, also, three days in the week and bringeth with him great stones and the rocks also therewith, and that great plenty. And anon, as they be entered into the Gravelly Sea, they be seen no more, but lost for evermore. And in those three days that that river runneth, no man dare enter into it; but in the other days men dare enter well enough.

Also beyond that flome, more upward to the deserts, is a great plain all gravelly, between the mountains. And in that plain, every day at the sun-rising, begin to grow small trees, and they grow till mid-day, bearing fruit; but no man dare take of that fruit, for it is a thing of faerie. And after mid-day, they decrease and enter again into the earth, so that at the going down of the sun they appear no more. And so they do, every day. And that is a great marvel.

In that desert be many wild men, that be hideous to look on; for they be horned, and they speak nought, but they grunt, as pigs. And there is also great plenty of wild hounds. And there be many popinjays, that they clepe psittakes their language. And they speak of their proper nature, and salute men that go through the deserts, and speak to them as apertly as though it were a man. And they that speak well have a large tongue, and have five toes upon a foot. And there be also of another manner, that have but three toes upon a foot, and they speak not, or but little, for they can not but cry.

This Emperor Prester John when he goeth into battle against any other lord, he hath no banners borne before him; but he hath three crosses of gold, fine, great and high,
full of precious stones, and every of those crosses be set in a chariot, full richly arrayed. And for to keep every cross, be ordained 10,000 men of arms and more than 100,000 men on foot, in manner as men would keep a standard in our countries, when that we be in land of war. And this number of folk is without the principal host and without wings ordained for the battle. And when he hath no war, but rideth with a privy meinie, then he hath borne before him but one cross of tree, without painting and without gold or silver or precious stones, in remembrance that Jesu Christ suffered death upon a cross of tree. And he hath borne before him also a platter of gold full of earth, in token that his noblesse and his might and his flesh shall turn to earth. And he hath borne before him also a vessel of silver, full of noble jewels of gold full rich and of precious stones, in token of his lordship and of his noblesse and of his might.

He dwelleth commonly in the city of Susa. And there is his principal palace, that is so rich and so noble, that no man will trow it by estimation, but he had seen it. And above the chief tower of the palace be two round pommels of gold, and in everych of them be two carbuncles great and large, that shine full bright upon the night. And the principal gates of his palace be of precious stone that men clepe sardonyx, and the border and the bars be of ivory. And the windows of the halls and chambers be of crystal. And the tables whereon men eat, some be of emeralds, some of amethyst, and some of gold, full of precious stones; and the pillars that bear up the tables be of the same precious stones. And the degrees to go up to his throne, where he sitteth at the meat, one is of onyx, another is of crystal, and another of jasper green, another of amethyst, another of sardine, another of cornelian, and the seventh, that he setteth on his feet, is of chrysolite. And all these degrees be bordered with fine gold, with the tother precious
stones, set with great pearls orient. And the sides of the siege of his throne be of emeralds, and bordered with gold full nobly, and dubbed with other precious stones and great pearls. And all the pillars in his chamber be of fine gold with precious stones, and with many carbuncles, that give great light upon the night to all people. And albeit that the carbuncles give light right enough, natheles, at all times burneth a vessel of crystal full of balm, for to give good smell and odour to the emperor, and to void away all wicked airs and corruptions. And the form of his bed is of fine sapphires, bended with gold, for to make him sleep well and to refrain him from lechery; for he will not lie with his wives, but four sithes in the year, after the four seasons, and that is only for to engender children.

He hath also a full fair palace and a noble at the city of Nyse, where that he dwelleth, when him best liketh; but the air is not so attempre, as it is at the city of Susa.

And ye shall understand, that in all his country nor in the countries there all about, men eat not but once in the day, as they do in the court of the great Chan. And so they eat every day in his court, more than 30,000 persons, without goers and comers. But the 30,000 persons of his country, ne of the country of the great Chan, ne spend not so much good as do 12,000 of our country.

This Emperor Prester John hath evermore seven kings with him to serve him, and they depart their service by certain months. And with these kings serve always seventy-two dukes and three hundred and sixty earls. And all the days of the year, there eat in his household and in his court, twelve archbishops and twenty bishops. And the patriarch of Saint Thomas is there as is the pope here. And the archbishops and the bishops and the abbots in that country be all kings. And everych of these great lords know well enough
the attendance of their service. The one is master of his household, another is his chamberlain, another serveth him of a dish, another of the cup, another is steward, another is marshal, another is prince of his arms, and thus is he full nobly and royally served. And his land dureth in very breadth four month’s journeys, and in length out of measure, that is to say, all isles under earth that we suppose to be under us.

Beside the isle of Pentexoire, that is the land of Prester John, is a east isle, long and broad, that men clepe Mistorak; and it is in the lordship of Prester John. In that isle is great plenty of goods.

There was dwelling, sometime, a rich man; and it is not long since; and men clept him Gatholonabes. And he was full of cautels and of subtle deceits. And he had a full fair castle and a strong in a mountain, so strong and so noble, that no man could devise a fairer ne stronger. And he had let mure all the mountain about with a strong wall and a fair. And within those walls he had the fairest garden that any man might behold. And therein were trees bearing all manner of fruits, that any man could devise. And therein were also all manner virtuous herbs of good smell, and all other herbs also that bear fair flowers. And he had also in that garden many fair wells; and beside those wells he had let make fair halls and fair chambers, depainted all with gold and azure; and there were in that place many diverse things, and many diverse stories: and of beasts, and of birds that sung full delectably and moved by craft, that it seemed that they were quick. And he had also in his garden all manner of fowls and of beasts that any man might think on, for to have play or sport to behold them.

And he had also, in that place, the fairest damsels that might be found, under the age of fifteen years, and the fairest young striplings that men might get, of that same
age. And all they were clothed in cloths of gold, full richly. And he said that those were
angels.

And he had also let make three wells, fair and noble and all environed with stone
of jasper, of crystal, diapered with gold, and set with precious stones and great orient
pearls. And he had made a conduit under earth, so that the three wells, at his list, one
should run milk, another wine and another honey. And that place he clept Paradise.

And when that any good knight, that was hardy and noble, came to see this
royalty, he would lead him into his paradise, and show him these wonderful things to his
disport, and the marvellous and delicious song of diverse birds, and the fair damselis, and
the fair wells of milk, of wine and of honey, plenteously running. And he would let make
divers instruments of music to sound in an high tower, so merrily, that it was joy for to
hear; and no man should see the craft thereof. And those, he said, were angels of God,
and that place was Paradise, that God had behight to his friends, saying, _Dabo vobis
terram fluentem lacte et melle._ And then would he make them to drink of certain drink,
whereof anon they should be drunk. And then would them think greater delight than they
had before. And then would he say to them, that if they would die for him and for his
love, that after their death they should come to his paradise; and they should be of the age
of those damosels, and they should play with them, and yet be maidens. And after that
yet should he put them in a fairer paradise, where that they should see God of nature
visibly, in his majesty and in his bliss. And then would he shew them his intent, and say
them, that if they would go slay such a lord, or such a man that was his enemy or
contrarious to his list, that they should not dread to do it and for to be slain therefore
themselves. For after their death, he would put them into another paradise, that was an
hundred-fold fairer than any of the tother; and there should they dwell with the most fairest damosels that might be, and play with them ever-more.

And thus went many diverse lusty bachelors for to slay great lords in diverse countries, that were his enemies, and made themselves to be slain, in hope to have that paradise. And thus, often-time, he was revenged of his enemies by his subtle deceits and false cautels.

And when the worthy men of the country had perceived this subtle falsehood of this Gatholonabes, they assembled them with force, and assailed his castle, and slew him, and destroyed all the fair places and all the nobilities of that paradise. The place of the wells and of the walls and of many other things be yet apertly seen, but the riches is voided clean. And it is not long gone, since that place was destroyed….

Many other isles there be in the land of Prester John, and many great marvels, that were too long to tell all, both of his riches and of his noblesse and of the great plenty also of precious stones that he hath. I trow that ye know well enough, and have heard say, wherefore this emperor is clept Prester John. But, natheles, for them that know not, I shall say you the cause.

It was sometime an emperor there, that was a worthy and a full noble prince, that had Christian knights in his company, as he hath that is now. So it befell, that he had great list for to see the service in the church among Christian men. And then dured Christendom beyond the sea, all Turkey, Syria, Tartary, Jerusalem, Palestine, Arabia, Aleppo and all the land of Egypt. And so it befell that this emperor came with a Christian knight with him into a church in Egypt. And it was the Saturday in Whitsun-week. And the bishop made orders. And he beheld, and listened the service full tentively.
And he asked the Christian knight what men of degree they should be that the prelate had before him. And the knight answered and said that they should be priests. And then the emperor said that he would no longer be clept king ne emperor, but priest, and that he would have the name of the first priest that went out of the church, and his name was John. And so ever-more sithens, he is clept Prester John.

In his land be many Christian men of good faith and of good law, and namely of them of the same country, and have commonly their priests, that sing the Mass, and make the sacrament of the altar, of bread, right as the Greeks do; but they say not so many things at the Mass as men do here. For they say not but only that that the apostles said, as our Lord taught them, right as Saint Peter and Saint Thomas and the other apostles sung the Mass, saying the Pater Noster and the words of the sacrament. But we have many more additions that divers popes have made, that they ne know not of.
Appendix F

Inscriptions related to Prester John on the Fra Mauro Map (1459)

In questa abassia ne li lor boschi è gran quantità de miel in tanto che i non cura de recolierlo e quando è el suo inuerno le pioçe grandissime che slauaça queli arbori, quel miel descree in alcuni proximi lagi e per uirtù del sol quella aqua deuenta come un uin, e queli de lì beue de quella in luogo de uin. “In the woods of this Abassia there is such a great quantity of honey that they do not bother to collect it. When in the winter the great rains wash these trees, that honey flows into some nearby lakes and, thanks to the action of the sun, that water becomes like a wine, and the people of the place drink it in place of wine.” (10, I 26)

Se dice che presto Jane ha più de 120 regni soto el suo dominio, di qual più de 60 sono de differente lengue. E de tuto questo numero, zoè 120, se dice che 72 sono potenti signori, el resto non è da far conto. “It is said that Prester John has more than 120 kingdoms under his dominion, in which there are more than 60 different languages. And of all this number - that is, the 120 - it is said that 72 are powerful seignories, and the others are not of much account.” (10, F 37)

Questo Re de abasia dito presto Janne ha soto el suo dominio molti regni et è estimada la sua potentia grandissima per numero de populi i qual son quasi infiniti. E questo signor quando el ua in oste sempre ha siego un milion de homini, j qual uano nudi in bataia, saluo che pur molti de lor portano pelle de chocodrili fate in luogo de arme.
“This king of Abassia, called Prester John, has many kingdoms under his dominion; and his enormous power is held in esteem because of the numbers of his people, who are almost infinite. And when this lord travels with his host of armies, he has with him one million men, who go naked into battle, except that many of them wear crocodile skin in place of armor.” (10, g8)

De sopra el Regno de abbassia è una çente ferocissima e ydolatra la qual è separada da la abbassia per una fiumera e per montagne a li passi de le qual i Re de abassia hano fatto forteçe grandissime açoché queli populi non possano passar e danificar el suo paese.

Questi sono homeni fortissimi e de gran statura e sono tributarii del Presto Janne Re de abassia e serueno al dito de certo numero de miara de homini a suo bisogni etcetera.

“Above the Kingdom of Abbassia there is a very savage and idolatrous people who are separated from Abbassia by a river and by mountains, at the passes of which the kings of Abbassia have built great fortresses so that these peoples cannot pass and do harm to their country. These men are very strong and of great stature and they pay tribute to Prester John, King of Abassia, and certain thousands of these men serve him to his needs etc.” (10, A38)

Perché ad alguni par da nuouo che io parli de quest a parte meridional, la qual quasi èstà incognita a li antichi, perhò io respondo che tuto questo desegno da sayto in suso io l’ò habuto da queli proprij che sono nasudi qui, che son sta’ religiosi, i qual cum le suo man me hano desegnato tute queste prouincie e citade e fiumi e monti cum li suo nomi, le qual tute cosse non le ho possudo meter cum el debito ordine per non esserui logo.

“Because to some it will appear as a novelty that I should speak of these southern parts, which were almost unknown to the Ancients, I will reply that this entire drawing, from
Sayto upwards, I have had from those who were born there. These people are clerics who, with their own hands, drew for me these provinces and cities and rivers and mountains with their names; all these things I have not been able to put in due order for lack of space.” (10, I6)

Nota che abassini dicono hauer più teritorio de sopra el nascimento del nilo che de soto, çoè inuer nui. E dicono hauer maçor fiumi del nilo, el qual fra nui è tanto nominato de esser grando. Ma molti fiumi come apar li entra che’l fa esser grando. Unde i dice che al tempo del suo inuerno ch’è el maço e çugno, per le gran pioce che sono queli fiumi chrescono molto e dano augmento al nilo, per modo che l’abunda e cresce tanto che’l inunda l’egypto al tempo come è noto. “Note that the Abyssinians say their territory is more extensive to the south of the sources of the Nile than to the north. And they say that there are rivers there that are larger than the Nile, which amongst us is so famous for its size. As one can see, many rivers flow into the Nile and make it big. Thus it is said that at the time of their winter, between May and June, due to the great rains, these rivers swell and thus swell the Nile, which rises until it floods Egypt, as is well known.” (17, A5)

Perché sono molti cosmographi e doctissimi homeni i qual scriueno che in questa affrica, maxime ne le mauritanie, esserui molti monstruosi homeni e animali, parme neccessario qui notar el parer mio, non perhò che io uogli contradir a le autorità de tanti, ma per dir la diligentia ho habuta in inquirir tute le nouità se à possudo inuestigar per molti anni de questa affrica, commençando da libia, barbaria e tute le mauritanie perfina al fiume daloro e da i 7 monti atrauerso per terra de negri oltra el primo clima e de soto commençando da binimagra, marocho, fessa, siçilmens a e per quela costiera de monti e uerso el garbin per garamantia, saramantia, almaona, benichileb, cetoschamar e
Because there are many cosmographers and most learned men who write that in this Africa - and, above all, in the Mauritaniyas - there are human and animal monsters, I think it necessary to give my opinion. Not because I want to contradict the authority of these men but because of the care I have taken in all these years in studying all possible information concerning Africa. [I have studied]: from Libia, Barbaria and all the Mauritaniyas to the river of gold; from the Seven Mountains through the land of the negroes down beyond the first clima to Binimagra, Marocho, Fessa and Siçilmensa along the chain of mountains; southwest through Garamantia, Saramantia, Almaona, Benichileb, Cetoschamar, Dolcarmin and Dafur; southwards through the kingdom of Goçam towards southern Ethiopia; Abassia and its various kingdoms of Barara, Sabi and Hamara; and even lower, through the kingdom of Organa, to Nuba and the island of Meroes. And in all these kingdoms of the negroes I have never found anyone who could give me information on what those men have written. Thus, not knowing anything, I cannot bear witness to anything; and I leave research in the matter to those who are curious about such things.” (23, B13)

*Sono alcuni istoriographi i qual dice del fonte de j garamanti el qual de note è tanto caldo che chi li metesse le man se scoteria, e similiter el çorno è tanto fredo che'1 non se poria patu[?]. Dicono ancora de questi ethyopi molte noutiade maxime de i panphagi,*
agriophagi, antropophagi e cinomolgi e de li lor bestial costumi. Item de animali
monstruosi, zoè serpenti dragoni, basiliscii et altre nouitè le qual dir non posso.

“Various historiographers write of the source of the Garamantes, which is so hot at night
that anyone putting their hand in the water would be scolded; whereas during the day, the
water is so cold one cannot stand it. These writers give information on the Ethiopians,
avove all, the Panphagi, the Agriophagi, the Antropophagi and the Cinomolgi and their
bestial customs. They also talk about certain monstrous animals - such as serpents,
dragons and basilisks - and give other information I cannot mention here.” (17, C26)

This most fertile region was newly conquered by the great king of Abassia in around
1430 (09, b35)
Appendix G

The Account of Jan Huyghen Linschoten about Prester John

Now to say something of Prester John, being the greatest and the mightiest prince in all Affrica. His countrey beginneth from the entrance into the red sea and reacheth to the island of Siene, lying under Tropicus Cancri, excepting the coast of the same sea, which the Turke within these fiftie years hath taken from him. So that his government towards the Northwest and the East, lieth for the most part by the red sea, and Northeast, by the desarts of Nubia, and on the South side upon Monomugi. So that to set downe the the greatnesse of all the countries which this Christian king hath under his commandement, they are in compasse 4000 Italian miles. The cheefe cittie whereof, and wherein he is most resident, is called Belmalechi, his government is over many countries and kingdomes that are rich and abundant in gold, silver, and precious stones, and all sorts of mettals, his people are of divers colours, white, blacke, and betweene both, of a good nature and proportion.

The noblemen and gentlemen of the countrey, apparrel themselves in silke,embrodered with gold and other such like. In this countrey they observe lawes for wearing of apparrel by Negroes, as they do in Portingale, for that some are not permitted to weare any other apparrel but Leather: the people are Christians, but hold certaine

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2 Boldfaced terms were emphasized in this manner in the 1596 original text.
ceremonies of the Jewish lawe, and upon the day of conception of the Virgin Mary, al the kings and princes under his obedience, do come unto the saide towne of Belmachi, there to celebrate the feast, everie man bringing with him such treason or yearly tribute as he is bound to pay, and at the same feast the people come thither in pilgrimage to honour it, whereupon that day there is a great procession, and out of the church from whence they come, they bring an Image of the Virgin Mary, in form like a man, in massie gold, and where the eyes should be it hath two great rubies, the rest of the whole Image beeing wrought with excellent workmanship, and set with many precious stones, laying it on a beere of gold very cunningly wrought. At this procession Prester John himselfe is personally present, either sitting in a Chariot of golde, or riding on an Elephant, most richly trapped, himselfe apparelled in most strange and costly cloth of golde, all embrodered and set with pearles and stones most sumptuous to behold: to see this feast and Image the people ranne in so great troupes, that by reason of the prease, many are thrust to death.

This Emperour Prester John is not rightly named, for that his name is Belgian, Bel signifying the highest, perfectest, and excellentest of all things, and Gian Lorde, or Prince, which is proper to all that commaund or governe over others: so then Belgian signifieth the chiefe or highest Prince, which name being so joyned, is proper to none but the king, having also a surname of David, as our Emperours the name of Cæsar or Augustus.
Appendix H

The Description of Prester John and His Kingdom in The Fardle of Facions (1555)¹

But at this daye as myne Author Sabellicus² saieth that he learned of those that are enhabitantes in that countrey: The King of Ethiope (whom we commonly calle Pretoianes or Presbiter Ihon) is a man of suche power, that he is reported to haue vndre him thre skore and two other kinges. If the heade Bysshoppess of the Realme desire to do, or to haue aughte done, al is referred vnto him. Of him be giuen al benefices, and spiritual promocions, which prerogatiue the Pope hath giuen, to the maiestie of kinges. Yet is he him selfe no priest, he hath any maner of ordres. There is of Archebisshoppes (that is to say of superiour and head bisshoppes) a great nombre, whiche haue euerie one vndre them at the least twenty other. The Princes, Dukes, Earles, and head Bishoppes, and suche other of like dignitie, when they come abrode, haue a crosse, and a basine of golde filled ful of earthe caried before them: that thone maye put them in remembraunce that earth into earth must again be resolued, and the other renewe the memory of Christes suffering. Their priestes to haue yssue, mary one wyfe, but she ones beyng dead, it is vnlawfull to mary another. The temples and churches ther, are muche larger, much richer, and more gorgeous then ours, for the moste part voulted from the floore to the toppe. They haue


² Likely Marcus Antonius Coccius Sabellicus, a late fifteenth and early sixteenth Venetian scholar whose most afmous work was the 1504 world history entitled *Enneades sive Rhapsodia historiarum.*
many ordres of deuout men, moche like to our ordres of Religious: as the ordre of S.
Anthony, Dominique, Calaguritani, Augustines, and Machareanes, whiche are bound to
no colour but weare some suche one as Tharchebysshoppe shall allowe. Next vnto the
supreme and souereigne GOD, and Mary the virgin his mother, they haue moste in
honour Thomas sirnamed Didimus. This King, of all other the worthiest, whome they
call Gias (a name giuen him of his mightiness and power) is of the bloud of Dauid,
continued from one generation to another (as they are perswaded) by so many yeres of
succession. And he is not as the moste of the Ethiopians are, blacke, but white. Gamma
the chiefe citie, and as we terme it the chambre of the king, stondeth not by building of
masonrie, and carpentrie as ours, but strieted with tentes and pavilions placed in good
ordre, of veluet and saten, embrauded with silkes and purples of many diuers sortes. By
an auncient ordre of the realme, the king liueth eu er in presence and sighte of his people,
and neuer soiourneth within the walles aboue two daies. Either for that they iudge it an
vncomely thing, and a token of delicate slouthfulnes, or elles for that some law doth
forbid it. His army in the warres is ten hundred thouサンde men, fiue hundred Elephantes,
and horses, and Cameles, a wonderfull nomber, and this is but a meane preparacion. Ther
are throughoут the whole nacion certeine houses and stockes, that are pencionaries at
armes, whose issue is as it ware branded with the marcke of the crosse, the skinne beyng
pretely slitte. Thei vse in the warres, Bowe, Pique, Habregeon, and helmette. Their
highest dignitie is priesthode, the next, thordre of the Sages, whiche thei cal Balsamates,

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3 Perhaps the Mercedarians, the Roman Catholic order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy.

4 Saint Thomas the Apostle, also known as Doubting Thomas. The listed surname is derived from
the Greek word for “twin.” See John 11:16; 20:24; and 21:2, where this apostle is referred to as “Thomas,
also called the Twin (Didymus).”

5 A habergeon is a sleeveless coat of chain mail.
and Táquates. They attribute moche also to the giltlesse and vprighte dealing man, whiche vertue they estieme as the firste staier to climbe to the dignitie of the sages. The nobilitie hath the thirde place of dignitie, and the pencionaries aforesaid, the fourthe.

When the iudges haue giuen sentence of life, or of deathe, the sentence is brought to the headborough of the Citie (whom we call the Mayour) and they Licomegia: he supplieth the place of the King. Lawes written thei occupy none, but iudge accordyng to reason and conscience. If any man be conquest of adulterie he forfeiceth the fourtieth parte of his goodes, but thadulteresse is punished at home, accordyng to the discretion of the partie offended. The men giue dowrie to those whom thei mary withal, but not to those that thei purchase besides. Their womens attire is of Golde, (whereof that country hathe plentie) of pearle, and of Sarsenette. Bothe men and women are apparelled in long garments downe to the foote, slieued, and close rounde aboute of al maner of colours, sauing only blacke for that in that contry is proper for morning. They bewaile their dead. xl. daies space. In bancquettes of honour, in the place of our fruicte (which the latine calleth the seconde boorde) they serue in rawe flesshe very finely minced and spiced, whervpon the gestes fiede very licouricely. They haue no maner of wollen webbe, but are eyther cladde in sarsenettes, or in linnen. One maner of speache serueth not throughout the whole contry, but sondry and diuerse, aswel in phrase as in naming of thinges. Thei haue twise in the yere harvest, and twise in the yere somer. These Ethiopians or Indianes excepted, al the reste of the people of Libia Westward, are worshippers of Mahomet, and liue aftre the same sorte in maner, that the Barbariens do in Egipte at this present, and are called Maures, or Moores, as I thincke of their outleapes and wilde rowming. For that people was no lesse noysome to Lybie in those cursed tymes (when so greate mutacion of

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6 A sarsenet (or sarcenet) is a fine silk cloth typically used for lining other garments.
thinges happened, when peoples ware so chaunged, suche alteration of seruice, and religion broughte in, and so many newe names giuen vnto contries) then the Sarasens ware.
Appendix I

George Abbot’s Description of the Lands of Prester John (1599)¹

De bisinis, & Imperio Presbiteri Iohannis

In the inland of Africa, lyeth a very large contrie: extending it selfe on the East, to some part of the red sea: on the South, to the kingdome of Melinde, and a great way farther: on the North, vnto Egipt: on the West, vnto Manicongo, the people whereof are called Abisini: and it selfe, the dominion of him, whome wee commonly call in English, Prester John: but in Latine some tearme him, Praeciosus Iohannes, because of his ritches: but eh most part Presbiter Iohannes: writing of him, that as he is a prince absolute:so he hath also a priestlike, or patriarchall functió, & iurisdiction among thé. This is a verie mightie prince, & reputed to be one of the greatest Emperors of the world.

What was knowne of this contrie in former time, wa s knowne vnder the name of Æthiopia: but the voyages of the Portingales in these late days haue best described it. The people therefore are Christians, as is also their prince: but differing in many thinges from the West Church: and in no sorte acknowledging any supreame prerogatiue of the B. of Rome. It is thought that they haue retayned christianitie, even from the time of our Saviour, being supposed to be cóuerted by the Chamberlaine of Cambace the Q. of

¹ Transcribed from Abbot, George, Briefe Description of the Whole Worlde, London: Printed by T. Iudson, for John Browne, and are to be sold at the signe of the Bible in Fleeete-Streete, 1599. Facsimile printed at Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1970. Italic font used in original manuscript to highlight certain proper nouns.
Æthiopia: who was instructed concerning Christ, by Phillip the Euang\(^2\) in the acts of the Apostles. Euse,\(^3\) in his Ecclesiastical story, doth make mentió of this. But they do this day retaine Circumcision: whereof the reason may be, that the Eunuch their conuerter not hauing any further conference with the Apostle, nor any else for him, did receiue the ceremonies of the Church vnperfectly, retaining Circumcision: which among the Iewes was not abolished, when he had conference with Philip.

Within the dominion of Prester Iohn, the mountaines comonly called *Luna Montes*,\(^4\) where is the first wellspring and arising of the river *Nylus*: which riuer running violently along his countrey, and sometime hastely increasing by the melting of much snow from the mountaines, would ouer-run and drowne a great part of *Egipt*: but that is slaked by many Ponds, and Dams, and Sluces, which are within teh dominion of Prester Iohn. And in respect hereof, for the maintenance of these: The Princes of *Ægipt* have paid vnto the governour of the Abisines, a great tribute time out of mind: which of late, the great Turke supposing to be a custome needelesse, did deny: till the people of the Abisines by commandment of their Prince did breake downe their dammes: and drowning *Egipt*, did intórce the Turke to continue his pay, and to giue much money for the new making of them very earnestily, to his great charge, desiring a peace.

\(^2\) Philip the Evangelist, one of the seven Deacons selected to care for the Christian poor of Jerusalem. See Acts 6.

\(^3\) Eusebius of Caesarea, best known for his fourth century *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

\(^4\) This would be the Mountains of the Moon, described earlier in Chapter Two as a mountain range in central Africa long believed by Europeans to be the source of the Nile.
Appendix J

The Account of Don Juan de Castro on Prester John, in Purchas His Pilgrimes (1625)\(^1\)

The Preste John, which by another name, is called The King of the Abexi, is Lord of all the Land of Æhiopia sub Ægypto: which is one of the greatest Provinces we know in the World. This Easterne Empire beginneth at the Cape of Guardafui, called in old time, the Promontorie of Aromata, and from thence running along the Red Sea with Desert coasts, & not very crooked, it reacheth unto the bounds of the rich City of Suaquen: on the Northside it bordereth with the warlike people of the Nubiis or Nubians, which lyeth between the Land of the Abexii, and the superiour part of Egypt, called, Thebayda, and from hence running great spaces within the Land, toward that part where the Kingdome and Land of Manicongo lyeth, after it hath taken to it selfe some part of Libya interior, all the other on the West-side remayneth for his bounds, and presently turning againe behind the Springs and Lakes of Nilus, going through the fierie and unknowne Countries, it finisheth and endeth on the South-side in the Barbarian Gulfe, which at this day is knowne of the Portugals, which doe navigate the same on the Coast of Melinde and Magadaxo.

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\(^1\) Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes, Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and others (Volume VII)*. Glasgow: James McLehose and Sons, 1906, 249-250. De Castro was a captain in the *Estado da Índia* who served under Estêvão da Gama, the second son of Vasco da Gama and the brother of Cristóvão da Gama.
Appendix K

Prester John in Peter Heylyn’s *Cosmographie* (1652)

Of their Conversion to the Faith in the reign of a second *Candace*¹ (unless as Plinie thinketh, *Candace*² was the name of all their Queens) we have spoke already. To which the Æthiopians adde, that after the baptizing of their first Philip (the son of that *Candace*) by the hands of the *Eunuch*, the Emperours succeeding had the name of Philip. Till the religious life of *John*, a contemporary of the Emperour *Constans*,³ honoured as a Saint after his decease, made them take his name. Some building upon this Tradition, have to the name of *John* prefixed that of *Presbyter*, because (as they affirm) he executeth as well the *Sacerdotal* as the *Regall Office*; *Rex idem hominum Divumque Sacerdos*; the very *Anius*⁴ of the Poet;⁵ and this so commonly received that he is vulgarly called by the name of *Prester John*, and his *Estate* the Empire of *Prester John*; with no truth at all. Others more probably conceive, that this vulgar name of *Prester-John*, is but a corruption or a mistake for *Precious John*; and that the word *Prete* (by which his subjects call him) importeth no less. And yet I more incline to those, who finding that the word *Prestegan*

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¹ According to Acts 8:27, a treasury official of "Candace, queen of the Ethiopians" returned from a trip to Jerusalem and was subsequently baptised by the Apostle Philip. "Kandake" was also was the royal title of queens and queen mothers in the African empire of Kush.

² All italics in this excerpt exist in the original printing.

³ Likely Caesar Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus Augustus, better known as Constantine I.

⁴ In Greek mythology, Anius was the son of the god Apollo and the human Rhoeo.

⁵ A reference to Homer.
signifieth an *Apostle*, in the *Persian* tongue, and *Prestigani*, and *Apostolical* man: do thereupon infer that the title of *Padescha Prestigiani*, and *Apostolick King*, was given unto him for the *Orthodoxie* of his belief, which not being understood by some, instead of *Preste-gian*, they have made *Priest-John*, in *Latine Presbyter Johannes*; as by a like mistake, one *Pregent* (or *Prægian* as the French pronounce it) commander of some Gallies under Lewis the 12, was by the English of those times called Prior John.

*Prestegian* then, not *Priest-John*, is his proper adjunct; contractedly, but commonly called the *Prete* by the Modern *French* who usually leave out an S before a *consonant*. 
Appendix L

The Account of Philippe Avril: “The Dalaè-lama is the Famous Preste-Jean” (1693)

It appears by what I have said of the kingdom of Tanchut, that the Dalaè-lama is the same famous Preste-Jean, concerning whom Historians have written so variously. In a word, since that Title, and whatever many Authors have said of him, can be attributed to no Person more justly then to this Dalaè-lama, ‘tis more natural to acknowledge him in this Country of Asia, where he has always been, then to seek him out in Habyssinia, where he never was.

‘Tis also an understanding Observation of F. Kirker, who in his Polite Piece, touching the Particulars of China, after he has describ’d the Manners and Customs of the different people that encompass that wide Empire, demonstrates the Ingenuity of the Portugueses in the search which they have made after this so extraordinary Prince, and so well known in the world under the Name of Preste-Jean, of whom they publish’d so many particular things.

To clear this part of History which is altogether perplex’d, and at the same time to undeceive those who may have suffer’d themselves to be prepossess’d by all those

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2 This passage likely refers to Athanasius Kircher, S. J., a Jesuit missionary who was born at Giessen near Fulda in 1602, and died at Rome in 1680. Kircher’s most famous book was China Illustrata, published in Amsterdam by Janszon in 1667.
fabulous Tales that have been utter’d abroad as real Truths, they are to understand, that while the Portugueses were in search of the East Indies, John the Second sent one of his subjects, by Name of Peter de Covlan, to discover ‘em by Land, and particularly charg’d him to inform himself where that same Preste-Jean, so much talk’d of in Europe reign’d, yet not knowing in what part of the World his Empire lay.

The design of John the Second was to have made an alliance with him, persuad’d as he was, and according as he had heard it reported, that he was a potent Prince, and profess’d the Christian Religion. In obedience to his Princes Orders, Peter de Covlan pass’d into Asia, and penetrated a great way into India, where he learnt many things of great importance and curiosity: But notwithstanding all his diligence, he could not hear of Preste-John, nor meet with any body that could tell any Tidings of him; only coming to Caire, in his return homeward, he heard, that in Ethiopia, beyond Egypt, there reign’d a Rich and Potent Prince, who every time he shew’d himself in publick, had a Cross carry’d before him, and that he was a declar’d Protector of the Christians.

Now in regard these Marks agreed with the Character that had been given to him, to discover the Prince he was in search of, there needed no more to perswade that Traveller into a belief of what he most of all things in the world desir’d to know. So that he made no farther doubt but that Preste-John was that same Monarch of the Abyssinians, and he believed it so truly, that he wrote his Discovery into Portugal without any farther Examination. Nor were they more scrupulous at Lisbonne, where the news was receiv’d with a great deal of joy and applause. Upon which they who sail’d into Africa the following years, prepossess’d with this Opinion, contributed not a little to onfirm it by their Relations; so that as false as it was, the Mistake was soon spread all over Europe.
Now though this same stupid Error was refuted by several learned persons, and tho the falshood of it might be easily discover’d by what Damian de Goez, Nicolas Godigno, and Baltazar Tellez have written of it, as being perfectly inform’d of everything that concern’d Ethiopia, where they had been long resident, yet I cannot forbear to observe with F. Kirker, that the Latin Chronology of the Kings of Habyssinia makes no mention of Preste-John; and therefore all the Authors of any Antiquity that have taken occasion to mention him, still place him in Asia, tho they cannot agree in what part of the world he reign’d, no more than they can about the original of his Name.

A Modern Author imagins Preste-John to be a Corruption of Preste-Arkan, that is to say, King of the Adorers. Others with as little reason derive it from the Latin, Pretiosus Johannes. Some would have it to be, that as the Name of Cesar was common to all the Roman Emperours, so John was no less common to all these Princes we speak of, and that they bore that Name in honour of the Prophet Jonas, to which the Eastern people afterwards added the title of Priest, or Preste; not that these Kings were really dignifi’d with the Sacerdotal Character, but because they had usually a Cross carry’d before ‘em, as Protectors of the Christian Religion.

But Scaliger’s Conjecture seems to me more probable than all the rest, where he says, That Preste-Jean was a corruption of the Persian Word Prestegiani, which signifies Apostolic; that it was very likely that the Europeans who traffick’d into the East, having heard confusedly of that Prince, whom they heard frequently call’d Padischab Prestegiani, gave him by chance the Name of Preste-Jean, which sounded very like to Prestegiani, of which they understood not the real signification.

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3 Likely Joseph Justus Scaliger, a French religious leader and scholar.
As to the part of Asia, where Preste-Jean reign’d, methinks there is no reason to doubt of it, considering what the Ancient Authors have written. For upon a strict examination it will be found, that the greatest part of these Authors place him in that vast Country which extends itself from the Mogul, towards the East and North as far as China: Which is that, which St. Antonio sufficiently makes appear in the Third Tome of his History, where speaking of the Tartars, he observes that their Emperour sent a puissant Army under the command of his Son, to subdue those people that inhabited the lesser India; which Conquest being accomplish’d, the victorious Tartars advanced against the Christians who inhabited the Greater, or the Upper India; but that their King call’d Preste-Jean by the Vulgar, having drawn his Forces together, march’d against ‘em, and overthrew ‘em.

This is also that which Paul the Venetian,⁴ who knew the country better than any body, tells us more distinctly, as having resided several years at the Court of the Great Kan of the Tartars; for the Kingdom of Tenduc, or as others read it, Tanchut, this Kingdom, I say, where Marcus Paulus places Preste-John, is still in being, if we may believe those who have travell’d through it, and lies between China and the Empire of the Great Mogul. Which perfectly agrees with the Sentiments of those who have made Preste-John reign in Kitay;⁵ seeing that as I have already observ’d, it is not to be thought that by Kitay the Ancients meant China only, or some particular Kingdom; it being

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⁴ Anglicization of Marco Polo, not the Theosophic “Paul the Venetian” whose final incarnation is claimed to be as the artist Paolo Veronese (1528-1588).

⁵ The Kara-Khitan Khanate, or the Western Liao, a Khitan empire in Central Asia overrun by the Naimans and the Mongols in the thirteenth century.
sufficiently probable that they comprehend under that name all the country that lies
between the Obi, the Volga, and China, as the Muscovites understand it at this day.

The only thing that seems to raise some doubt in what we have said about Preste-
John is this: That Preste-John and the people under his Subjection were Christians,
whereas the Country that lies between the Mogul and China is full of Mahometans and
Idolaters. But certain it is that things were not always in the same posture as now they
are, but that the Christian Religion once flourish’d in these barbarous Countries, where
now Infidelity prevails.

‘Tis known that St. Thomas, after the Apostles had made a Division of the
Universe among themselves, departed from India, to cultivate those Unbelievers; that he
penetrated into the most remote parts of it; and dy’d at length in Meliapor. And some
Authors have written, not without some probability, that China it self receiv’d the Gospel
by the Ministry of that Holy Apostle. However it were, there is no question to be made,
in my Opinion, but that the Faith might be dispers’d in Countries more on this hand
toward the West, in regard there is a Country which the Moors, profess’d enemies of the
Christians, still in derision call Kiaferstan, or the Country of the Infidels, the Inhabitants
of which are call’d Christians of St. Thomas to this day; who tho they have forgot their
Ancient Christianity, yet still retain certain Customs that sufficiently demonstrate what
Religio their Ancestors profess’d. For beside that they baptize their children, they have

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6 The modern day city of Mylapore, long the supposed burial ground of the Apostle St. Thomas. The Portuguese established the viceroyalty of São Tome de Meliapore in the city in 1523.

7 Modern day Kāfiristān, a province in the Hindu Kush region of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Modern linguists dispute the idea that this name is derived from Arabic (“land of the Kaffirs”), but argue instead that the name is of Sanskrit origin (Kapiś). See Singh, Kirpal, The Kambojas Through the Ages, 2005, 94.
painted in their Churches, and bear upon their foreheads Three Crosses of a Red Colour, being a Tincture squess’d out of Sanders-Wood.\(^8\)

But tho it might be true, that presently after the Birth of Christ, the Gospel might not be promulgated in these Barbarous Countries, yet certain it is that it was preached there in the succeeding Ages. The celebrated Monument that was found in China in 1625, near the City of Siganfu,\(^9\) is an invincible proof of what I say. For it is observ’d, that Six hunder’d years after Christ, the Syrian Priests having scatter’d themselves all over Asia, had divulg’d the Christian Law in the Extremities of the World, where their Zeal for the Glory of God drew ‘em. And Hayton,\(^10\) a Christian Author, who was of the Blood Roayl of the Kings of Armenia, testifies, that in the Thirteenth Age, Tartary was full of Christians, that Cublai\(^11\) their Emperour embrac’d the Christian Faith; and that his Brother\(^12\) who had been a Christian for some time, entered into a Religious War for the sake of Religion, against the Caliph of Babylon,\(^13\) won Palestine from the Mahometans, reinthrones’d the King of Armenia, being expell’d his Territories by those Cruel Enemies of Christianity, restor’d to peaceful freedom those people whom the Infidels had proscrib’d and banish’d, and rebuilt a great number of Churches at his own costs and

\(^8\) Likely *Santalum album*, or Indian sandalwood.


\(^10\) Probably Hayton of Corycus, a thirteenth century Armenian noble-turned-monk and historian who moved to France and became the prior of the abbey at Poitiers. His most noteworthy texts were *Histoire merveilleuse, plaisante et recreative du grand empereur de Tartarie, Grand-Khan* and *La Flor des Estoires d'Orient*.

\(^11\) Kublai Khan, grandson of Chinggis Khan and the founder of the Yuan Dynasty.

\(^12\) Hulagu Khan.

\(^13\) Avril refers here to the sack and fall of Baghdad by the forces of Hulagu Khan in 1258.
charges; and all this at the sollicitation of the Princess his Wife, who glory’d in being defend’d from one of the Three Kings that came to adore Christ, when but newly born.

This was the same Haeton, who wrote to St. Lewis, when he lay in Cyprus at the time of his first Expedition for the recovery of the Holy Land. St. Antonin also, in whole Hostory may have seen that Letter of the Tartar Prince, observes that St. Lewis sent him, under the Character of Ambassadors, two Monks of the Order of St. Dominic, with very rich Presents, among which was a piece of the true Cross, and a Canopy of State of an extraordinary value, upon which were embroidered in Gold, the principal Mysteries of the Life of Christ.

This happen’d in the year 1256, and about forty or fifty years later, that is to say, toward the beginning of the fourteenth Age, several Franciscan Monks being sent to the Great Kan, visited all parts of the Kingdom of Thibet, which is next to that of Tanchut, and converted a great number of Infidels and Pagans.

Father Andrada, a Porteguese Jesuit, travelling also into these countries in 1624, reports that the people still had an idea of the Christian Mysteries, tho confus’d and corrupted; that they used among themselves a sort of Confession, feeble Remainders of the Faith which they had formerly embrac’d, and which by degrees was utterly extinguish’d.

There is no doubt then, after what has been said, but that the Kingdom of Tanchut, not having ben always Idolatrous as now it is, the Dalaè-lama who at present resides there, may be the true Successor of the famous Preste-John, who reign’d there formerly; and it

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14 Fr. Antonio de Andrada, a Jesuit missionary and explorer. Andrada was chief missionary in the Indies from 1600 to 1624, and he established a religious center at Chaparangue. Andrada ended his career in Goa as Superior of the Indies, the post he held when he died in 1634. See Franco, *Imagen du Virtude em a Noviciado de Lisboa*, 375-418.
is no less probable, that that same Monarch happening to change as the Religion corrupted, became sometime after Head of a new Religion which degenerated at last into Idolatry.

‘Tis true, he is not a Temporal Prince; but that may be the effect of the Wars and Revolutions that happen in all Kingdoms. However it were, he is still in high veneration among all the Eastern people, who acknowledge him for the Head of their Religion. And that which is farther remarkable is this, that he bears the Name of Lama, which in the Tartar Language signifies a Cross\(^{15}\): And the Bogdoi,\(^{16}\) who conquered China in 1644, and who are subject to the Dalaè in all matters of Religion, wear always Crosses\(^{17}\) about them, which they call Lama’s also, and for which they have an extraordinary Respect, which sufficiently demonstrates that they were formerly instructed in those Mysteries, of which that sign is in some measure an eternal Memorial.

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\(^{15}\) The Tibetan term *lama* actually translates as “teacher.”

\(^{16}\) This appears to be a Russian corruption of the Manchu term *Boydo ejen qan* (“holy lord emperor”); see Baddeley, J.F., *Russia, Mongolia, China...*(Volumes I and II)*, London: Macmillan, 1919. The Russians in the eighteenth century referred to the Qing Dynasty as “Bogdoi Tartars” (Богдои Татары). De Lange mentions a “Bogdoi-Chan” in his 1721 journal; see Pinkerton, John, *A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in All Parts of the World: Many of which are Now First Translated Into English*, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1811, 437 ff.

\(^{17}\) Avril is likely referring to the *namka*, a device made of wooden sticks and colored thread similar in appearance to Native American dream catchers.
### Appendix M

Analysis of Textbook Inclusion of the Prester John Legend

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textbook Title</th>
<th>At least two sentences</th>
<th>Briefly mentioned</th>
<th>Implied, not mentioned</th>
<th>No mention</th>
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<td><em>Human Experience</em></td>
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<th><strong>Patterns of Interaction</strong></th>
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