

The legend of Prester John begins sometime in mid-12th century Europe; the famous *Letter of Prester John* is dated circa 1165. Prester John [Latin: *Presbyter Johannes*, “Prester” is an archaic word for presbyter, or priest] is a legendary Christian patriarch and king popular in European chronicles and tradition from the 12th through the 17th century. He was said to rule over a *Nestorian* [Church of the East] Christian nation lost amid the Muslims and pagans of the Orient, in which the Patriarch of the Saint Thomas Christians resided. The accounts are varied collections of medieval popular fantasy, even depicting Prester John as a descendant of the Three Magi, ruling a kingdom full of riches, marvels, and strange creatures.

At first, Prester John was imagined to reside in India; tales of the Nestorian Christians’ evangelistic success there and of Thomas the Apostle’s sub continental travels as documented in works like the *Acts of Thomas* probably provided the first seeds of the legend. After the coming of the Mongols to the Western world, accounts placed the king in Central Asia, and eventually Portuguese explorers convinced themselves that they had found him in Ethiopia, which had been officially Christian since the fourth century. Prester John’s kingdom was thus the object of a quest, firing the imaginations of generations of adventurers, but remaining out of reach. He was a symbol to European Christians of the Church’s universality, transcending culture and geography to encompass all humanity, in a time when ethnic and inter-religious tension made such a vision seem distant.

For reasons unknown, there is a gap of roughly 150 years between the introduction of the Letter and the earliest inclusion of Prester John on a map. One might speculate that he was included on earlier maps that have not survived, or that he did not gain significance to cartographers until the tales of men such as Marco Polo and John Mandeville helped confirm his existence. The earliest confirmed cartographic representation of Prester John is on Giovannina da Carignano’s portolan chart of 1310, the oldest surviving *portolan* [nautical] chart. Although the map was destroyed in the Second World War, surviving photographs show us that Carignano placed Prester John in Ethiopia. Originally believed to be in Asia, Prester John was moved into Ethiopia – where Christians were known to live – thanks to European accounts which discredited the idea of an Asian Prester John. The cognitive dissonance produced by such an idea was a problem with which the European cartographer was forced to grapple for many centuries.

Though its immediate genesis is unclear, the legend of Prester John drew strongly from earlier accounts of the Orient and of Westerners’ travels there. Particularly influential were the stories of Saint Thomas the Apostle’s proselytizing in India, recorded especially in the third century work known as the *Acts of Thomas*. This text inculcated in Westerners an image of “India” as a place of exotic wonders and offered the earliest description of Saint Thomas establishing a Christian sect there (the “Saint Thomas Christians”), motifs that loomed large over later accounts of Prester John. Similarly, distorted reports of the Church of the East’s movements in Asia informed the legend as well. This church, also called the *Nestorian* church and centered in Persia

[Iran], had gained a wide following in the Eastern nations and engaged the Western imagination as an assemblage both exotic and familiarly Christian. Particularly inspiring were the Nestorians' missionary successes among the Mongols and Turks of Central Asia; French historian René Grousset suggests that one of the seeds of the story may have come from the Kerait clan, which had thousands of its members converted to Nestorian Christianity shortly after the year 1000. By the 12th century, the Kerait rulers were still following a custom of bearing Christian names, which may also have fueled the legend.

Nestorians of Central Asia had spread impressive reports of King John, but when the Flemish Franciscan missionary and explorer William Rubruck was travelling through what was believed to be John's country, no one knew anything about Prester John, save for a few Nestorians. Rubruck reports that this John had a brother named Unc, who lived three weeks from John in the town of Karakorum; Unc had abandoned Christianity to become an idolater and supported likeminded priests. Rubruck locates Prester John's territory to the southern foothills of the Tarbagatai mountain ridge, the place of Güyük Khan's encampment.

13th century Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, variously rendered in English as John of Pian de Carpine, John of Plano Carpini only mentions Prester John in his description of the rise to power of the Mongol empire: Genghis Khan is said to have sent an army to India Major, but its ruler, King John, faced the khan's army and dispersed it. Carpini does not say whether John was a Nestorian or not and makes no mention of John's riches nor of visiting his empire himself.

The 14th century traveler and statesman John of Montecorvino also placed Prester John's empire in Central Asia. In one of his epistles Montecorvino reports that he converted a Nestorian king named George, one of Prester John's descendents, to Catholicism but makes no mention of the empire's legendary riches and power.

Drawing on his own travel experience, the late-medieval Franciscan friar and missionary explorer Odoric of Pordenone in his account of his visit to China makes comments similarly skeptical to those made by Rubruck:

I arrived at the country of Prester John but as regards him not one hundredth part is true of what is told of him as if it were undeniable. His principal city is called Tozan, and chief city though it is, Vicenza would be reckoned its superior. He has, however, many other cities under him, and by a standing compact always receives as wife the Great Khan's daughter.

Close ties between the khan and Prester John are also mentioned by Marco Polo, who states that John's empire used to be so powerful that the Mongols themselves paid him tribute, but later they rebelled against him and freed themselves from his rule by crossing a desert and heading north. When Genghis Khan became the ruler of the Mongols, Polo continues, he asked Prester John for permission to marry his daughter, which John refused; in a subsequent battle Prester John was defeated and his descendents now rule his country under the Mongols' control.

Jordanus, distinguished as Jordan of Severac or Jordan of Catalonia, was a Catalan Dominican missionary and explorer in Asia known for his *Mirabilia Descripta* describing the marvels of the East. In Jordanus' account Prester John's empire is, similarly to *Paradise*, made part of the mythical *India Tertia*, while John is described as the king of Ethiopi.

Giovanni de' Marignolli, variously anglicized as John of Marignolli or John of Florence, was a notable 14th century Catholic traveler to medieval China. Marignola too places John's empire in Ethiopia without providing any further details.

Additionally, a kernel of the tradition may have been drawn from the shadowy early Christian figure John the Presbyter of Syria, whose existence is first inferred by the ecclesiastical historian and bishop Eusebius of Caesarea based on his reading of earlier church fathers. This man, said in one document to be the author of two of the Biblical Epistles of John, was supposed to have been the teacher of the martyr bishop Papias, who had in turn taught Eusebius' own teacher Irenaeus. However, there is little that links this figure, supposedly active in the late first century, to the Prester John legend beyond the name.

The later accounts of Prester John borrowed heavily from literary texts concerning the East, including the great body of ancient and medieval geographical and travel literature. Details were often lifted from literary and pseudo-historical accounts, such as the tale of Sinbad the Sailor. The Alexander romance, a fabulous account of Alexander the Great's conquests, was especially influential in this regard.



Preste Iuan de las Indias [Prester John of the Indies] positioned in East Africa on a 16th century Spanish portolan chart

Whatever its influences, the legend began in earnest in the early 12th century with reports of visits of an Archbishop of India to Constantinople, and of a Patriarch of India to Rome at the time of Pope Callixtus II (1119–1124). These visits, apparently from the Saint Thomas Christians of India, cannot be confirmed, evidence of both being second-

hand reports. What is certain is that German chronicler Otto of Freising reported in his *Chronicon* of 1145 that the previous year he had met a certain Hugh, bishop of Jabala in Syria, at the court of Pope Eugene III in Viterbo. Hugh was an emissary of Prince Raymond of Antioch seeking Western aid against the Saracens after the Siege of Edessa, and his counsel incited Eugene to call for the Second Crusade. He told Otto, in the presence of the pope, that Prester John, a Nestorian Christian who served in the dual position of priest and king, had regained the city of Ecbatana from the brother monarchs of Medes and Persia, the *Samiardi*, in a great battle "not many years ago". Afterwards Prester John allegedly set out for Jerusalem to rescue the Holy Land, but the swollen waters of the Tigris compelled him to return to his own country of riches and strange creatures, in which the Patriarch of Saint Thomas resided. His kingdom contained such wonders as the *Gates of Alexander* and the *Fountain of Youth*, and it even bordered the *Earthly Paradise*. Among his treasures was a mirror through which every province could be seen.

Otto's account appears to be a muddled version of real events. In 1141, the Kara-Khitan Khanate under Yelü Dashi defeated the Seljuk Turks near Samarkand. The Seljuks ruled over Persia at the time and were the most powerful force in the Muslim world, and the defeat at Samarkand weakened them substantially. The Kara-Khitan at the time were Buddhists and not Christian, and there is no reason to suppose Yelü Dashi was ever called Prester John. However, several vassals of the Kara-Khitan practiced Nestorian Christianity, which may have contributed to the legend, as well as the possibility that the Europeans, who were unfamiliar with the concept of Buddhism, assumed that if the leader was not Muslim, he must be Christian. Whatever the case may be, the defeat encouraged the Crusaders and inspired a notion of deliverance from the East, and it is possible Otto recorded Hugh's confused report to prevent complacency in the Crusade's European backers; according to his account, no help could be expected from a powerful Eastern king.

No more of the tale is recorded until about 1165 when copies of what was certainly a forged *Letter of Prester John* started spreading throughout Europe. An epistolary wonder tale with parallels suggesting its author knew the *Romance of Alexander* and the above-mentioned *Acts of Thomas*, the Letter was supposedly written to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenus (1143–1180) by Prester John, descendant of one of the Three Magi and King of India. The many marvels of richness and magic it contained captured the imagination of Europeans. It circulated in ever more embellished form for centuries in manuscripts, a hundred examples of which still exist. As time passed, the letter became more elaborate as anonymous authors added beguiling, utterly fantastic details; so great was its appeal that it became one of the most widely circulated and discussed documents of the Middle Ages, translated into French, German, Russian, Hebrew, English, among other languages, and with the introduction of movable type, it was reprinted in countless editions; it was still current in popular culture during the period of European exploration. Part of the letter's essence was that a lost kingdom of Nestorian Christians still existed in the vastnesses of Central Asia.

The letter was quite convincing since the author had obviously read Otto von Freisingen's report. In part the letter read, "If you should wish to come here to our kingdom, we will place you in the highest and most exalted position in our household, and you may freely partake of all that we possess. Should you desire to return, you will go laden with treasures. If indeed you wish to know wherein consists our great power, then believe without doubting that I, Prester John, who reign supreme, exceed in riches, virtue, and power all creatures who dwell

under heaven. Seventy-two kings pay tribute to me. I am a devout Christian and everywhere protect the Christians of our empire, nourishing them with alms." As it continued, the letter became overtly symbolic, yet it was taken to be factual: *"Our magnificence dominates the Three Indias, and extends to Farther India, where the body of St. Thomas the Apostle rests. It reaches through the desert toward the palace of the rising sun, and continues through the valley of the deserted Babylon close by the Tower of Babel."* By "India," Prester John, or whoever wrote this missive, meant more than just the Indian subcontinent. During the Middle Ages, India was believed to include a good portion of northeastern Africa. It was an elastic term, and medieval geographers obeyed the convention that there were several *Indias*, some near, and some far.

Prester John described his kingdom as an enchanted realm, far more luxurious than European countries beaten down by war, plague, famine, and, among less memorialized miseries, the hardships inflicted by the Little Ice Age. In contrast, Prester John boasted of the wonders of his kingdom: *"In our territories are found elephants, dromedaries, and camels, and almost every kind of beast that is under heaven. Honey flows in our land, and milk everywhere abounds. In one of our territories no poison can do harm and no noisy frog croaks, no scorpions are there, and no serpents creep through the grass. No venomous reptiles can exist there or use their deadly power. In one of the heathen provinces flows a river called the Physon, which, emerging from Paradise, winds and wanders through the entire province; and in it are found emeralds, sapphires, carbuncles, topazes, chrysolites, onyxes, beryls, sardonyxes, and many other precious stones."*

And there was much more; this mysterious religious leader claimed his dominion reached from Eastern Europe to India and contained satyrs, griffins, a phoenix, and other wonderful creatures. He lived, or so he said, in a palace without doors or windows, built of precious stones cemented with gold.

Prester John's letter was actually written by imaginative monk toiling in anonymity, and the result begged to be read as a symbolic document, an allegory, or an expression of faith. Yet it was taken as a factual account and diplomatic initiative. Those who read the letter or heard about it wanted to know where Prester John actually lived. The letter's renown had grown to the point that Pope Alexander III issued a reply via his physician Magister Philippos on September 27, 1177 addressed to the "illustrious and magnificent king of the Indies and a beloved son of Christ," and pilgrims went in search of the elusive Prester John. The Letter continued to circulate, accruing more embellishments with each copy. In modern times, textual analysis of the letter's variant Hebrew versions has suggested an origin among the Jews of northern Italy or Languedoc: several Italian words remained in the Hebrew texts. At any rate, the Letter's author was most likely a Westerner, though his or her purpose remains unclear.

The letter could have been proven a forgery from the first edition of the letter, which copied exactly the description of the palace of Saint Thomas, the Apostle. Most often, the letter was addressed to Emanuel I, the Byzantine Emperor, though other editions were also often addressed to the Pope or the King of France.

The letters always told that Prester John ruled a huge Christian kingdom in the East, comprising the 'three Indias'. He ruled a peaceful kingdom, where 'honey flows in our land and milk everywhere abounds. Prester John also 'wrote' that he was besieged by infidels and barbarians and he needed the help of Christian European armies. The letter caused a sensation and not only were copies circulated widely, but excerpts were even put to music.

Over time, the contents of the Letter grew and grew; copyists embellished the text, adding ingredients to Prester John's domain. One important interpolation described spices in vivid detail: *"In another of our provinces pepper is grown and gathered, to be exchanged for corn, grain, cloth, and leather"* – which sounded plausible enough, but then the interpolation took an allegorical twist – *"that district is thickly wooded and full of serpents, which are of great size and have two heads and horns like rams, and eyes which shine as brightly as lamps. When the pepper is ripe, all the people come from the surrounding countryside, bringing with them chaff, straw, and very dry wood with which they encircle the entire forest, and, when the wind blows strongly, they light fires inside and outside the forest, so that the serpents will be trapped. Thus the serpents perish in the fire, which burns very fiercely, except those which take shelter in their caves."* In the Age of Faith, the serpents were representative of the devil, which invades the Edenic garden of peppers, and which could be defeated only by the fire of faith.

The mythical empire's localization frequently varied between India, Central Asia and Ethiopia. In the times of the Franciscan and Dominican missions, retrieval of information about this empire and, if possible, establishment of contacts complied with the European power interests of that time. Unlike the terrestrial *Paradise*, whose supposed existence in the East lacked any urgency for European travelers since it was known to be inaccessible to humans, the empire of Prester John was a hot topic.

In the mid-13th century when Asia was opened again to Europeans by the ascendancy of the Tartars, the great search began to find this Prester John. In 1245 Pope Innocent IV sent missionaries to the Mongol Kahn at Karakorum in Mongolia to find the legendary Christian empire of Prester John. In 1248, a monk by the name of Giovanni Capini mentioned in his writings "a king of Greater India who had defeated the Mongols by filling up copper soldiers on horseback with explosives and sending these through the ranks of the Mongolian army." These tidings encouraged many 13-14th century European travelers such as Marco Polo or the Franciscan friar Odoric of Pordenone to search fruitlessly for the great king.

In 1221, Jacques de Vitry, Bishop of Acre, returned from the disastrous Fifth Crusade with good news: King David of India, the son or grandson of Prester John, had mobilized his armies against the Saracens. He had already conquered Persia, then under the Khwarezmian Empire's control, and was moving on towards Baghdad as well. This descendant of the great king who had defeated the Seljuks in 1141 planned to reconquer and rebuild Jerusalem. Controversial Soviet historian and ethnologist Lev Gumilev speculated that the much reduced crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem in the Levant resuscitated this legend in order to raise Christian hopes and to persuade European monarchs who had lost interest by that time in getting involved in costly crusades in a distant region that was far removed from their own states and affairs.

The bishop of Acre was correct in thinking that a great King had conquered Persia; however "King David", as it turned out, was Tengrist warlord Genghis Khan. His reign took the story of Prester John in a new direction. Though Genghis was at first seen as a scourge of Christianity's enemies, he proved to be tolerant of religious faiths among those subjects that did not resist the empire, and was the first East Asian ruler to invite clerics from three major religions (Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism) to a symposium so that he might learn more about their beliefs. The Mongol ruler was also reputed to have a Nestorian Christian favorite among his many wives, whom the Europeans imagined as influential in the disastrous Mongol sack of Baghdad.

The Mongol Empire's rise gave Western Christians the opportunity to visit lands that they had never seen before, and they set out in large numbers along the Empire's secure roads. Belief that a lost Nestorian kingdom existed in the east, or that the Crusader states' salvation depended on an alliance with an Eastern monarch, was one reason for the numerous Christian ambassadors and missionaries who were sent to the Mongols. As previously mentioned these include Franciscan explorers Giovanni da Pian del Carpine in 1245 and William of Rubruck in 1253.

The link between Prester John and Genghis Khan was elaborated upon at this time, as the Prester became identified with Genghis' foster father, Toghrul, king of the Keraites, given the Jin title *Ong Khan Toghrul*. Fairly truthful chroniclers and explorers such as Marco Polo, Crusader-historian Jean de Joinville, and the Franciscan voyager Odoric of Pordenone stripped Prester John of much of his otherworldly veneer, portraying him as a more realistic earthly monarch. Odoric places John's land to the west of *Cathay* en route to Europe, and mentions its capital as *Casan*, which may correspond to Kazan, the Tatar capital near Moscow. Joinville describes Genghis Khan in his chronicle as a "wise man" who unites all the Tartar tribes and leads them to victory against their strongest enemy, Prester John. William of Rubruck says a certain "Vut", lord of the Keraites and brother to the Nestorian King John, was defeated by the Mongols under Genghis. Genghis made off with Vut's daughter and married her to his son, and their union produced Möngke, the Khan at the time William wrote. According to Marco Polo's *Travels*, the war between the Prester and Genghis started when Genghis, new ruler of the rebellious Tartars, asked for the hand of Prester John's daughter in marriage. Angered that his lowly vassal would make such a request, Prester John denied him in no uncertain terms. In the war that followed, Genghis triumphed and Prester John perished.

In these Medieval travelogues, the original legend of a powerful empire underwent a major transformation. Without questioning the country's existence as such, the authors remained immune to its earlier fabulous descriptions and saw it as devoid of its supposed splendor, either because it had already vanished or had always been a mere legend. King John only preserves his majesty in Jordanus' *Mirabilia*, in a section devoted to *India Tertia*; Marignola mentions John's empire without further details. None of the travelers make a single mention of Prester John's empire being located anywhere near the heavenly *Paradise*. The restraint adopted by these travelers in their accounts of Prester John's mythical land still did not prevent a further dissemination of the legend in the European literature. While never questioning the country's existence, they never gave up their intentions to describe everything the way they had seen it with their own eyes.

The historical figure behind these accounts, Toghrul, was in fact a Nestorian Christian monarch defeated by Genghis. He had fostered the future Khan after the death of his father Yesugei and was one of his early allies, but the two had a falling out. After Toghrul rejected a proposal to wed his son and daughter to Genghis' children, the rift between them grew until war broke out in 1203. Genghis captured Sorghaghtani Beki, daughter of Toghrul's brother Jaqa Gambu, and married her to his son Tolui; they had several children, including Möngke, Kublai, Hulagu, and Ariq Böke.

The major characteristic of Prester John tales from this period is the kings' portrayal not as an invincible hero, but merely one of many adversaries defeated by the Mongols. But as the Mongol Empire collapsed, Europeans began to shift away from the idea that Prester John had ever really been a Central Asian king. At any rate they had

little hope of finding him there, as travel in the region became dangerous without the security that the Mongol Empire had provided. In works such as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* and *Historia Trium Regum* by John of Hildesheim, Prester John's domain tends to regain its fantastic aspects and finds itself located not on the steppes of Central Asia, but back in India proper, or some other exotic locale. Wolfram von Eschenbach tied the history of Prester John to the Holy Grail legend in his poem *Parzival*, in which the Prester is the son of the Grail maiden and the Saracen knight Feirefiz.

Although Prester John was never found in Asia, this search can be considered as crucial to opening up Asia and especially important for re-establishing ties with China.

A theory was put forward by the Russian scholar Ph. Bruun in 1876, who suggested that Prester John might be found among the kings of Georgia, which, at the time of Crusades, experienced military resurgence challenging the Muslim power. However, this theory, though regarded with certain indulgence by Henry Yule and some modern Georgian historians, was summarily dismissed by Friedrich Zarncke.

The reported existence of a powerful Christian Prince, *Presbyter* or *Prester John*, in the center of Asia is also closely connected with the legend of the Biblical *Three Kings*. This rumor first reached Europe through the Bishop of Gabala in 1145, and it was supposed that this Royal Priest was a direct successor or descendant of the *Three Kings*. Dr. Oppert believes that this mysterious personage was Yeliutashe of the Liao dynasty, which ruled in Northern China from 906 to 1125. Having been expelled by the Koreans, Yeliutashe went forth with part of his horde, and founded the Empire of the Kara Khitai, which at one time extended from the Altai to Lake Aral, and assumed the title of Korkhan. The King George in *Tenduk*, whom Marco Polo describes as a successor of *Presbyter John*, was actually a relative of this Yeliutashe who had remained in the original seats of the tribe not far from the Hwang-ho, and of Kuku-kotan, where the Kutakhtu Lama of the Mongols resided when Gerbillon visited the place in 1688. It was this King George whom Friar John of Montecorvino claims to have converted in 1292.

The Tarshish of the Psalmist must be sought in the East, in maritime India, and not at Tartessus in the West; Sheba was in Southern Arabia, and Saba on the authority of Marco Polo probably in Persia. *Saba Ethiopie*, however, in course of time, was transferred to *Abyssinia*, and its Christian ruler was accepted as the veritable and most popular *Prester John*. Friar John of Marignola (1338-53) is the first traveler who mentions an "African archpriest," and on a map of the world that Cardinal Guillaume Filastre presented in 1417 to the library of Reims we read *Ynde Pbr Jo* at the easternmost cape of Africa.



Depiction of the Kerait ruler Ong Khan as "Prester John" in "Le Livre des Merveilles", from the 15th century

Prester John had been considered the ruler of India since the legend's beginnings, but "India" was a vague concept to the Europeans. Writers

often spoke of the “Three Indias”, and lacking any real knowledge of the Indian Ocean, they sometimes considered Ethiopia one of the three. Westerners knew that Ethiopia was a powerful Christian nation, but contact had been sporadic since the rise of Islam. No Prester John was to be found in Asia, so European imagination moved him around the blurry frontiers of “India” until it found an appropriately powerful kingdom for him in Ethiopia.

Despite that failed reconnaissance, countless explorations had the goal of reaching and rescuing Prester John's kingdom. By the 14th century, exploration had proved that Prester John's kingdom did not lie in Asia, so subsequent “Letters” wrote that the besieged kingdom was located in *Abyssinia* (present-day Ethiopia).

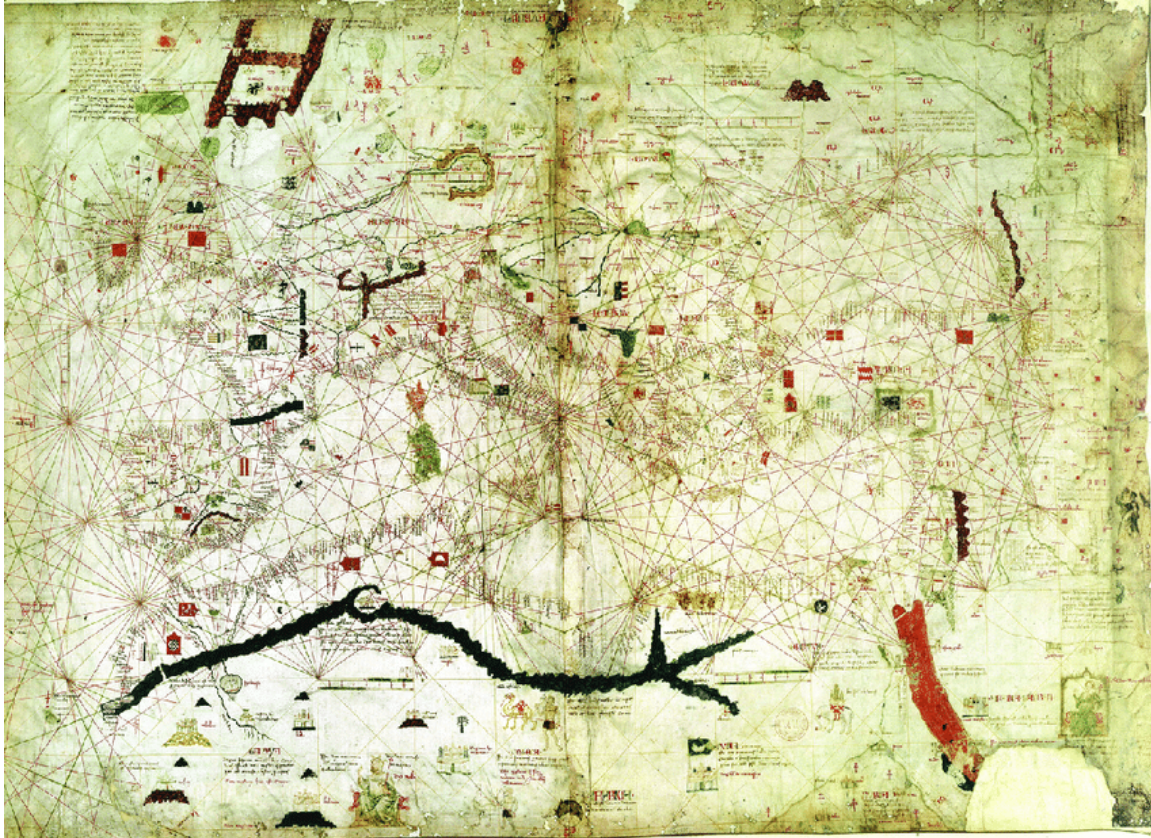
This was spurred by the fact that there was an actual Christian kingdom there, the Nestorian kingdom of Abyssinia or Ethiopia. Mysterious Abyssinian pilgrims sometimes visited the Holy Land, though their kingdom was rumored to be bordered by inaccessible mountains. What better place to put the Kingdom of Prester John? Eastern Africa was sometimes confused with the ‘Indies’ and so it was soon generally accepted that this great Christian King was to be found in the East.

For reasons unknown, there is a gap of roughly 150 years between the introduction of the Letter and the earliest inclusion of Prester John on a map. One might speculate that he was included on earlier maps that have not survived, or that he did not gain significance to cartographers until the tales of men such as Polo and Mandeville helped confirm his existence. The earliest confirmed cartographic representation of Prester John is on Giovannia da Carignano's portolan chart of 1310, the oldest surviving portolan chart. The Carignano chart was long held by the Archivio di Stato in Florence, Italy. Alas, already fragile, the chart was destroyed in 1943 during a bombing of Naples, where it was temporarily on exposition. All that remains of it are a set of photographs and notes by earlier scholars. This map shows us that Carignano placed Prester John in Ethiopia. Originally believed to be in Asia, Prester John was moved into Ethiopia – where Christians were known to live – thanks to European accounts that discredited the idea of an Asian Prester John. The map is actually signed *Presbiter Johannes Rector sancti Marci de portu Ianue me fecit* [Priest John Mark, a ruler of the port of Genoa me]. The cognitive dissonance produced by such an idea was a problem with which the European cartographer was forced to grapple for many centuries.

Athanasius Kircher's 1657 *China Illustrata* is a telling example of the location of Tibet oscillating between the weight of a legendary and imaginary past and the fresh first-hand information provided by the geographers, cartographers, and explorers that the Jesuit missionaries in India, central Asia, and China proved to be. Even in the second half of the 17th century, Tibet was described by Kircher as “the main kingdom of Prester John in Cathay”. The confusion Europeans had about Tibet-Cathay made Prester John linger longer in the European imagination.



Photographic copy of Giovannia da Carignano's portolan chart of 1310



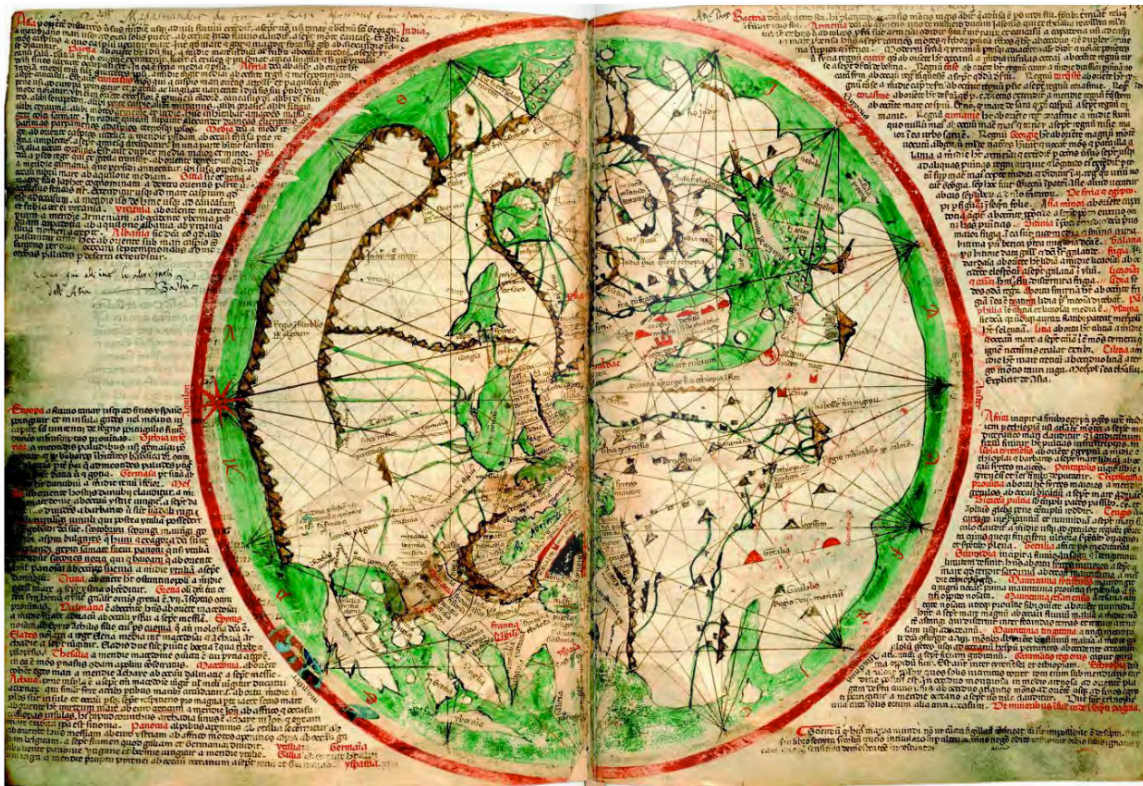
A portolan chart made by Angelino Dulcert (Mallorca, 1339)

Another surviving map that portrays Prester John is a *portolan* chart made by Angelino Dulcert (Mallorca, 1339). Increasingly, Ethiopia was marked on maps as the kingdom of Prester John, probably because of the arrival of regular Ethiopian embassies in Europe from 1329. These delegations visited Venice, Rome, Aragon, Naples, Milan and established a permanent home in Rome at St. Stephen of the Ethiopians, where from 1537 to 1552, Tasfa Seyon, or 'Peter the Ethiopian', edited a New Testament in Ge'ez, the Ethiopian liturgical language. Geographers, however, were not entirely sure where Ethiopia was.

Compared with imagery circulating within Europe, travel writing of that time marks a considerable decline in this mythical country's prestige, depriving the mythical empire of its original aura and describing Prester John no longer as the powerful "king of Indians," but as a local prince temporarily ruling a territory somewhere in Central Asia.



Detail from Angelino Dulcert's portolan chart, 1339, depicting Prester John in Ethiopia



Vesconte world map, 1320, 35 cm diameter, oriented with East at the top
British Library, Additional MS. 27376*, ff.187v-188/8v-9r (#228)

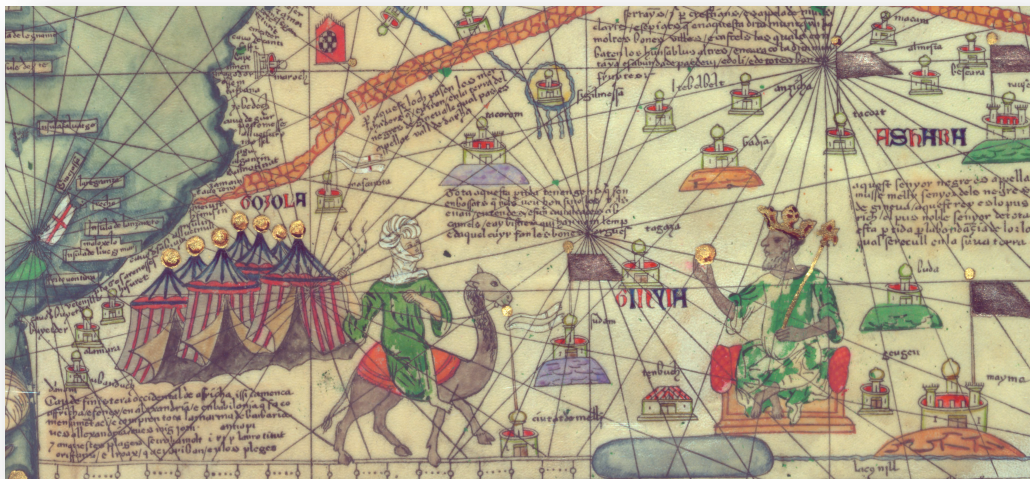


At left is a reference to Prester John in India on the 1320 mappa mundi created by Pietro Vesconte (see #228)

Vesconte's world maps were circular in format and oriented with East to the top, although most of the fabulous elements so common to early world maps have been omitted, Prester John, the mythical Christian king occasionally located in Ethiopia, does manage to appear on Vesconte's map and has been "re-located" to India.

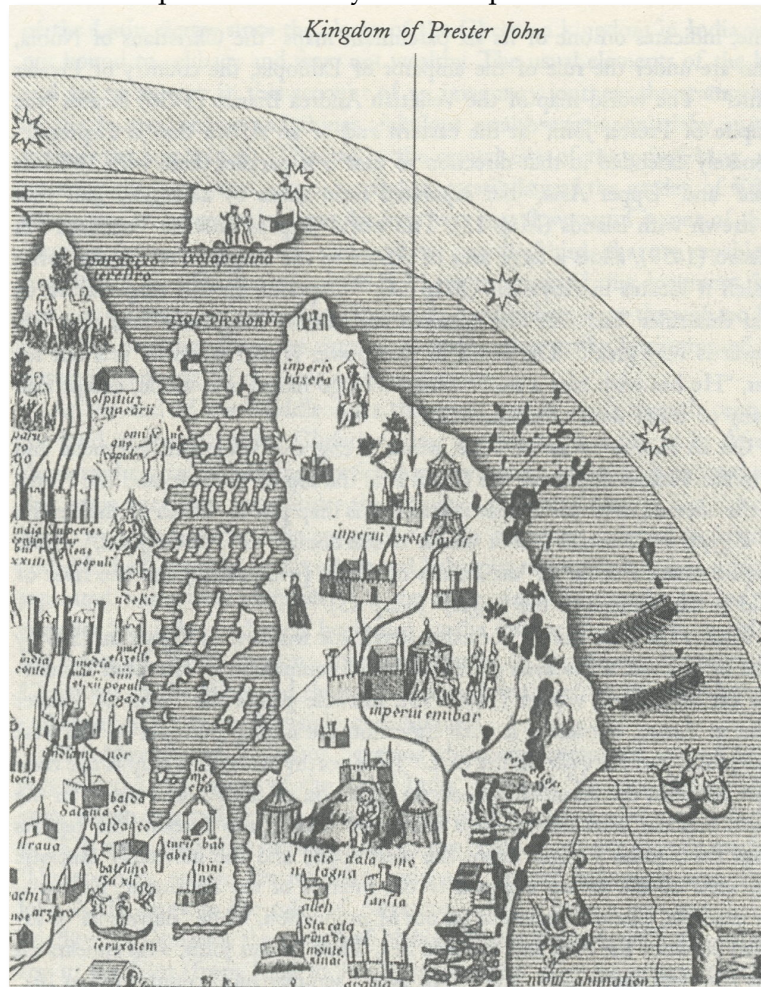
As William Hansard wrote: "Although they sometimes had to stretch their imagination, cartographers felt a need to portray Prester John on their maps because he was real, and he was real because he was depicted on their maps." On the 1375 Catalan Atlas (see below), in North Africa, East of the Sultan of

Mali appears the King of Organa, in turban and blue dress, holding an oriental sword and a shield. He is, we are told, "a Saracen who waged constant war against the Saracens of the coast and with the other Arabs." Still farther to the east is the King of Nubia, "always at war and under arms against the Nubian Christians, who are under the rule of the Emperor of Ethiopia and belong to the realm of Prester John."



Detail of North Africa from the 1375 Catalan Atlas (#235)

Even the well-educated people during the European Middle Ages placed credence in fantastic realms on earth, such as the persistent belief in the existence of the kingdom of Prester John. It is difficult to overestimate the influence of this fabulous personage on the European imagination during the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. He was part Christian ruler and part Kublai Khan. Despite an enormous number of inconsistencies and improbabilities in the details surrounding Prester John and his realm, as discussed above, his existence was widely believed in for several hundred years. In an era of violent conflict between Christianity and Islam, and unsuccessful Crusades, it was vastly reassuring to the faithful to believe that a sprawling and wealthy Christian outpost existed beyond Europe.



Prester John in Africa on the Andrea Bianco map of 1436 (#241)

Polo, a tireless name-dropper, says he first encountered Prester John by reputation, as the lord of the Tatars, the inhabitants of northern China, who “paid him a tribute of one beast in every ten.” Polo and his collaborator merged the Prester John legend with another figure at least partly inspired by an actual person, his Tatar rival. In 1200, Polo says, Genghis Khan sent word to Prester John to announce that he wished to marry the priest's daughter. “Is not Genghis Khan ashamed to seek my daughter in marriage?” Prester John exclaimed to the messengers. “Does he not know he is my

vassal and my thrall? Go back to him and tell him that I would sooner commit my daughter to flames than give her to him as his wife." Polo's collaborator displayed a fanciful touch by explaining that Genghis Khan became so distressed that "his heart swelled within him to such a pitch that it came near to bursting within his breast." When he recovered, predictably enough, he decided to go to war against Prester John.

The battle—an epic struggle, according to Marco Polo—pitted the largest armies ever assembled on a "wide and pleasant plain called Tenduc, which belonged to Prester John." This is thought to be Mongolia, but as with so much else to do with Prester John, it is impossible to know for certain. Just before taking up arms, Ghengis Khan asked his astrologers to predict the outcome, and to his delight they announced that he would carry the day. Two days later, the battle began in earnest: "This was the greatest battle that was ever seen. Heavy losses were suffered on both sides; but in the end the fight was won by Ghengis Khan. In this battle Prester John was killed. And from that day he lost his land, which Ghengis Khan continued to subdue."

Polo adds a curious postscript to the defeat of Prester John and Christianity in China. Tenduc, Polo says, became the home for descendants of both Genghis Khan and Prester John. "The province is ruled by a king of the lineage of Prester John, who is a Christian and a priest and also bears the title Prester John. His personal name is George. He holds the land as a vassal of the Great Khan—not all the land that was held by Prester John, but a great part of it. I may tell you that the Great Khans have always given one of their daughters or kinswomen to reigning princes of the lineage of Prester John." Polo populates Tenduc with all sorts of marvelous creatures; even the biblical Gog and Magog can be found there. Despite these imaginative excesses, *The Travels of Marco Polo* inspired Europe to conceive of trading with the kingdoms of Asia, and of exploring the world. Many of the sailors on Magellan's 1520 voyage were familiar with it, and at least one brought a copy of Polo's account along with him.

Marco Polo had discussed Ethiopia as a magnificent Christian land and Orthodox Christians had a legend that the nation would one day rise up and invade Arabia, but they did not place Prester John there. Then in 1306, 30 Ethiopian ambassadors from Emperor Wedem Arad came to Europe, and Prester John was mentioned as the patriarch of their church in a record of their visit. The first clear description of an African Prester John is in the *Mirabilia Descripta* of Dominican missionary Jordanus, around 1329. In discussing the "Third India", Jordanus records a number of fanciful stories about the land and its king, whom he says Europeans call Prester John.

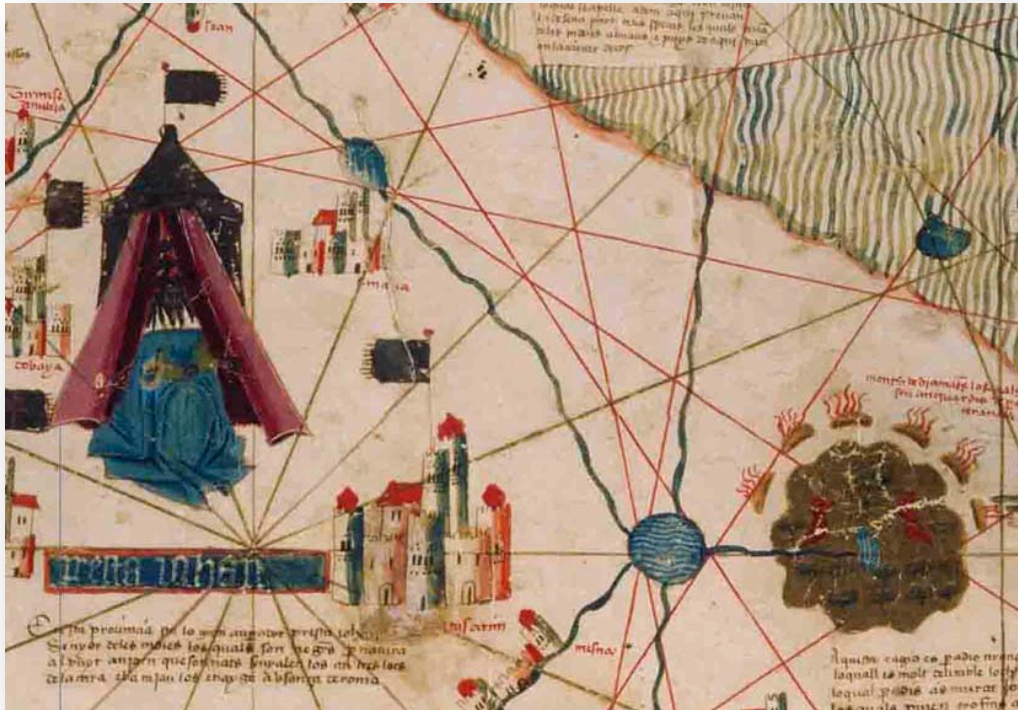


Prester John in East Africa on the CGA5d portolan chart, 1450

A number of 14th century maps make mention of Prester John, and one of the earliest map with a pictographic representation of Prester John is the *Catalan Estense* world map of c.1450 (see monograph #246). In Africa, there sit a handful of rulers, reigning from elegant tents to shade them from the sun. Although at least one of these characters is real ("Rey Melli", or Mansa Musa I of Mali), in Ethiopia reigns the fictional Prester John. He is depicted similarly to the other African kings, and written underneath him are a few sentences describing his kingdom and speaks of a ruler of a people who are black. Not far from the seat of Prester John is the earthly *Paradise* and the four rivers which flow from it; He claimed in the Letter that his kingdom was only a few days' travel from *Paradise*. The phenotype of Prester John is also worth examining. Although Europeans knew that Prester John's empire was in a far-off land, they might have imagined that he looked much like themselves. This cartographer, however, has chosen to depict Prester John as a native of Africa. He is lean, dark-skinned and bearded, matching up with the description given in the text. This clearly demonstrates the map's juxtaposition of archaism and modernism. Including a depiction of Prester John at all is archaic, in that confirming his existence and power goes against contemporary knowledge. To depict him in a realistic manner and adapt the legend to current knowledge is decidedly modern.



The 1450 Catalan Estense mappamundi (#246)



On the left, Prester John is depicted on the 1450 Catalan Estense mappamundi in Ethiopia and near the Terrestrial Paradise, on the right. Located near the territory of Prester John between Nubia and the city of Arin [Civitasarim], the latter prominently marked and centrally placed in the Horn of Africa, not far from the Indian Ocean in which six islands of various sizes and colors are depicted. Paradise is guarded by five high "Diamond Mountains" surmounted by flames. Within Paradise Adam and Eve are shown standing on either side of the Tree of Life. The single river originates in the middle of the Garden before flowing out of it into a lake, there after to separate into four streams. One legend, near Cape Verde, explains the equal duration of night and day at the equator and, another, close to Paradise, emphasizes that the delights of the Garden of Eden are incomparable with the features of any other earthly region.

Kingdom of Prester John



The 1452 Borgia map, detail: Prester John in Central Africa (South at the top) #237

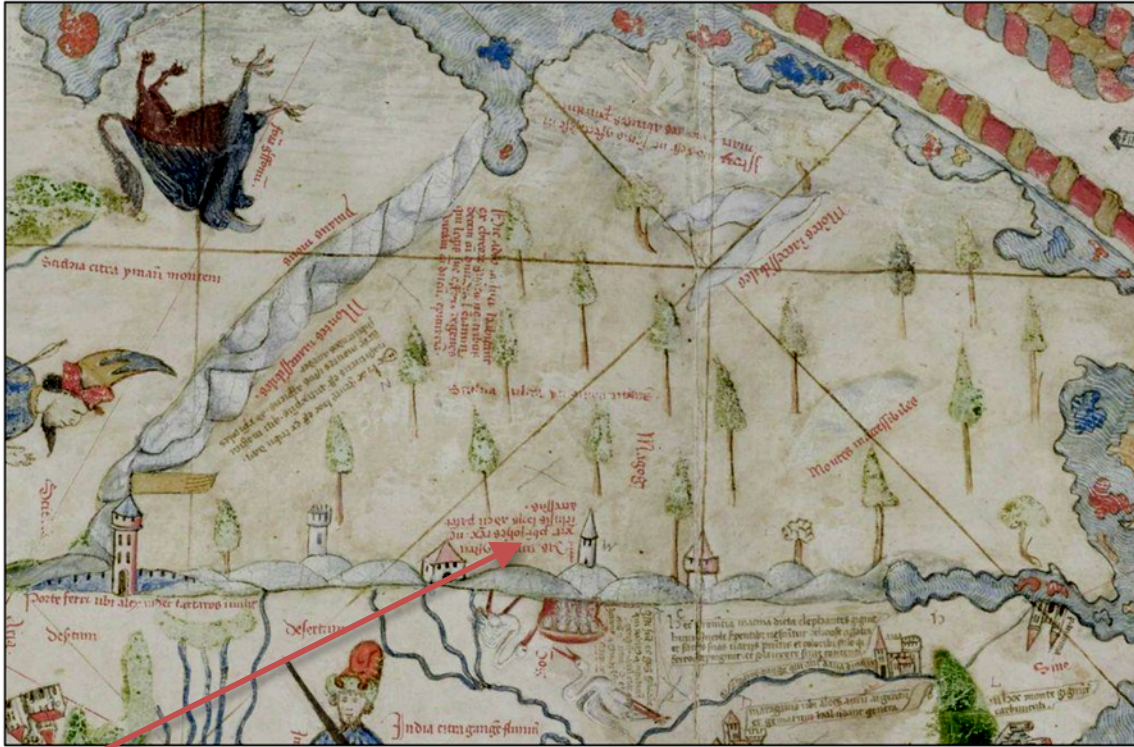
One might expect – based on earlier maps and Europeans’ increasing knowledge of the Orient – that Prester John’s reign over Ethiopia was incontrovertible by the Late Middle Ages. However, the cartographer of the *Genoese mappamundi* of 1457 (see monograph #248) had a far more complicated relationship with the legend of Prester John. The cartographer was particularly interested in the Indian Ocean. “In this sea they navigate by a southern pole star, the northern having vanished,” he quotes from Niccolo de’ Conti. He goes further; in one of the great mysteries in the history of cartography, he depicts a three-masted carrack sailing the Indian Ocean, about forty years before the first voyage of Vasco da Gama – who had carried letters of introduction to Prester John with him – created a sailing link between Europe and India.

Most unusual is that on this *Genoese mappamundi* Prester John is actually depicted three times, in three different locations. In Ethiopia, his identity is clear; he is mentioned by name as “Presbyter Johannes rex”, and given a graphical representation accompanied by a block of text. In China, he is mentioned only textually, as the co-creator of Alexander’s Wall. Finally, in India, there is a large illustration of a ruler who is called “Indorum rex”; this is likely a reference to Prester John, who had proclaimed himself to be king of the “Three Indias” in the Letter. These representations of the Presters John are puzzling, and vastly different from each other. In Ethiopia, “Presbyter Johannes rex” is dark-skinned and appears Sub-Saharan in his caricatured features. “Indorum rex” looks comparatively less stylized. He is of Northern European stock rather than Indian, with

pale skin and blonde hair. His cloak and armored horse also appear distinctly European. This would likely have been consistent with the portrait of Prester John Europeans had painted in their imaginations. Why the two representations would not be consistent is difficult to explain. According to Hansard perhaps Prester John was more of a dream for the cartographer than a reality; this argument could be extended to the idea of the sea route to India as well. However, considering the relative modernity of the map, and medieval perceptions of reality, it is difficult to imagine that the cartographer would have included something he did not believe to exist. It is also possible that these two representations are of different persons entirely. Still, the fact remains that Prester John is explicitly accounted for at least two times on the map, thousands of miles apart.



The Genoese mappamundi, 1457 (#248)



Detail of the Genoese world map: mountainous region of China enclosing Gog and Magog by Alexander, with turrets constructed by Prester John. The towers displayed in Asia on the Genoese map are explained in the following legend: King Prester John built these towers in order that those shut therein might not have access to him. These towers stretch along the crest of the mountains, as if intended to protect the more highly civilized parts of China from the wild people of north and central Asia. It seems probable that we have here an early reference to the Great Wall of China, which appears on no other medieval map. Abulfeda and Raschiduddin, his contemporary, refer to the great wall as the Wall of Gog and Magog. As the builder of this wall, our cosmographer in his legend names Prester John who appeared on the Catalan map of 1375 in the Nubian and the Abyssinian regions, and from that time on the name seems to have been connected with the last-named region, though, as the Genoese map shows, it did not completely disappear from central Asia. There is support for the belief that in the letter of Alexander III, the ruler of Abyssinia is to be understood, although the great majority of the allusions to him seem to support the idea that the original Prester John was a central Asiatic ruler.



Detail of the Genoese World Map: "Presbyter Johannes rex" in Africa

Detail of the Genoese world map in India: "Indorum rex" in India, another possible allusion to Prester John. A closer look at the map's representations of Prester John (in varying guises) on the Genoese map raises further questions about the mapmaker's understanding of space. Prester John is explicitly named and pictured again in Ethiopia, where he is shown as ruler. This is in line with a tendency, starting in the 14th century, to show him in Africa, as it became increasingly clear that he could not be found in Asia. It is possible that the "Indorum rex" in India is another allusion to Prester John, as he was named ruler of the three Indias in the 12th century letter supposedly written by him to the Byzantine emperor. It seems that the mapmaker gathered all of the information available to him and situated Prester John in three distant locations. The interesting question is whether the appearances of



Prester John on different continents represents two options with a decision pending, or if it means Prester John is located in different places – which could jeopardize the thesis of a homogenous conception of space. Apparently, the mapmaker has no quibble with illustrating the same people at different times or one person at different locations on the map. The phenotypes of the Presters John are puzzling, and vastly different from each other. In Ethiopia, “Presbyter Johannes rex” is dark-skinned and appears Sub-Saharan in his caricatured features. “Indorum rex” looks comparatively less stylized. He is of Northern European stock rather than Indian, with pale skin and blonde hair. His cloak and armored horse also appear distinctly European. This would likely have been consistent with the portrait of Prester John Europeans had painted in their imaginations. Why the two representations would not be consistent is difficult to explain. Perhaps Prester John was more of a dream for the cartographer than a reality; this argument could be extended to the idea of the sea route to India as well.

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 15th century Camaldolese monk and mapmaker in Venice (#249). The land of *Abassia* [Mauro’s term for *Abyssinia*], which Mauro identified in his map as the central region of 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 quantity. In addition, the country of *Abassia* possessed agricultural wealth to match its royal prosperity, and the following 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.

In this aesthetically appealing and highly detailed map, Mauro provided quite a few inscriptions that offer insights into the nature of the contemporary European views about Prester John’s kingdom. Mauro wrote that “Prester John has more than 120 kingdoms under his dominion, in which there are more than 60 different languages.” 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 Mauro, was a “most fertile region” conquered by the “great king of Abassia” somewhere near the year 1430. Mauro located this land between the regions of Mogodisso and Sacara. Mauro identified and had much to say about another tribute-paying land that fell under the authority of Prester John; in the 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.

By the time the emperor Lebna Dengel and the Portuguese had established diplomatic contact with each other in 1520, Prester John was the name by which Europeans knew the Emperor of Ethiopia. The Ethiopians, though, had never called their emperor that. When ambassadors from Emperor Zara Yaqob attended the Council of Florence in 1441, they were confused when council prelates insisted on referring to their monarch as Prester John. They tried to explain that nowhere in Zara Yaqob's list of regal names did that title occur. However, their admonitions did little to stop Europeans from calling the King of Ethiopia Prester John. Some writers who used the title did understand it was not an indigenous honorific; for instance Jordanus seems to use it simply because his readers would have been familiar with it, not because he thought it authentic.



*Fra Mauro's Mappamundi, 1459 (#249)
(oriented with South at the top)
190.5 cm diameter*

The land of *Abassia* (Mauro's term for Abyssinia), which Mauro identified in his map as the central region of 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 quantity. In addition, the country of *Abassia* possessed agricultural wealth to match its royal prosperity, and the following Mauro inscription is reminiscent of Paradise in its expression of the earthly splendor and bountiful harvests in Prester John's realm:

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Detail: The capital of the Kingdom of Prester John as depicted in Africa on the Fra Mauro map; the inscription reads as follows: *Qui el presto Janne fa residentia principal* [Here is the principal residence of Prester John]

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 Mauro, and that "when this lord travels with his host of armies, he has with him one million men." 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."

On the famous 1492 Behaim globe (#258), the third of the Holy Kings is located in East Africa, near the mouth of the Red Sea. Here is a royal tent with the following legend: *The kingdom of one of the Three Holy Kings, him of Saba.* Below this we read *Saba*,

which clearly stands for *Shoa* or *Shewa*, and to the west is a picture of this *Prester John of Abassia* with a kneeling figure in front of him. The following legends refer to *Presbyter John*. Marco Polo is the authority for the first of these legends, which locates the Presbyter in *Tenduk*, at Thian-te-kiang on the Hwang-ho, to the southwest of Kuku-hotan.

In this country resides the mighty Emperor known as Master John, who is appointed governor of the three holy kings Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior in the land of the Moors. And his descendants are good Christians, as are also many kings who are under them.

Og to the west and *Magog* to the south of *Tenduk* are described by Marco Polo as being subject to the *Prester*. These are the tribes of the *Apocalypse* (xx. 8), but Polo says that they are known to the natives as *Ung and Mongul*, that is, the *Un-gut*, a Turkish tribe, and the Mongols. To the east of *Tenduk* we read:

The country towards midnight is ruled by the Emperor Mangu, khan of Tartary, who is a wealthy man of the great Emperor, the Master John of India, the wife of the great King is likewise a Christian.

Mangu-khan ruled 1251-59. He was a grandson of Genghis Khan and Kublai's elder brother. The above information as well as that given in the remaining legends may have been taken from Sir John Mandeville's *Travels*, who himself is indebted to Haiton, Friar Odorico and others. In the *Sinus magnus* of Ptolemy we also read: *This sea, land and towns all belong to the great Emperor Prester John of India*. In the southern hemisphere embedded in other legends is the following:

All this land, sea and islands, countries and kings were given by the Three Holy Kings to the Emperor Presbyter John, and formerly they were all Christians, but at present not even 72 Christians are known to be among them.

In his *Travels*, Mandeville says that 72 provinces and kings were tributaries of Prester John, on the authority of an apocryphal letter supposed to have been sent to Manuel Commenus (1143-80), the Pope and others.



Detail from the 1492 Behaim globe showing Prester John in Ethiopia (#258)

The background of the legend's origin is rather complicated, but the character of Prester John was inspired by a real person and the legend itself is associated with Qara-Khitai victory over the Seljuk Sultan Sanjar.

The legend gained considerable prominence and was quoted by various sources until the 16th century. The mythical empire's localization frequently varied between India, Central Asia and Ethiopia. In the times of the Franciscan and Dominican missions, retrieval of information about this empire and, if possible, establishment of contacts complied with the European power interests of that time. Unlike *Paradise*, whose supposed existence in the East lacked any urgency for European travelers since it was known to be inaccessible to humans, the empire of Prester John was a hot topic. Still, compared with imagery circulating within Europe, travel writing of that time marks a considerable decline in this mythical country's prestige, depriving the mythical empire of its original aura and describing Prester John no longer as the powerful "king of Indians," but as a local prince temporarily ruling a territory somewhere in Central Asia.

On his very famous world map of 1569, Gerard Mercator (*see monograph #406*) devotes a large block of text dedicated to the history of Prester John and the origins of the Tartars, who destroyed his empire. Mercator summarizes accepted information that had been chronicled by famous travelers. He then uses this information to claim that the Prester John in Asia is not the same Prester John as the "Prete Giam" that reigns in Africa. While there existed in Asia rulers that fit the description of Prester John, the "true" Prester John ruled in Ethiopia. Mercator's compiled research finds that the Asian Prester John was actually a succession of kings of an Oriental empire, an idea gaining much traction at the time. Still, he does not contend that Prester John must not exist, which he might well have concluded through his research. With this deft textual maneuvering, according to Hansard Mercator was able to challenge and correct the previous body of work related to Prester John without completely dismantling it; he could not contest the powerful desire for Prester John to exist. Mercator's thought process shows a thorough attention to detail, yet his choosing to manifest Prester John as a human being is incongruent with his desire for geographic accuracy. His phenotype here is of Northern Europe, despite the fact that he rules in Africa. He sits on a throne of

European make, wearing clothes that are European in style. That he holds a Christian cross aloft gives some authenticity, while emphasizing the dual nature of his power. The idea of a Prester John being African would not have been foreign to Mercator, as both the Catalan and Genovese maps depicted Prester John as African. Michael Brooks argues that: "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."

The astronomer and mathematician Gemma Frisius (1508-1555) has also been said to have produced a map of the Prester John empire around 1522 but little is known about this particular map. The legendary 18-sheet world map of his disciple, Gerard Mercator (1512-1594) however clearly locates the legend of Prester John in Asia, more specifically in Siberia. In this region, a text in Latin reads *Naiaam ex qua Presbiter Joannes prodijt* [The water from which Prester John appeared].



Prester John and the Nile River on Vesconte Maggiolo's 1516 chart of the Atlantic and western Indian Oceans



Africa as portrayed on the Harleian world map of 1544, #347



Detail of Prester John



Prester John in Africa on Sebastião Lopes' 1565 chart

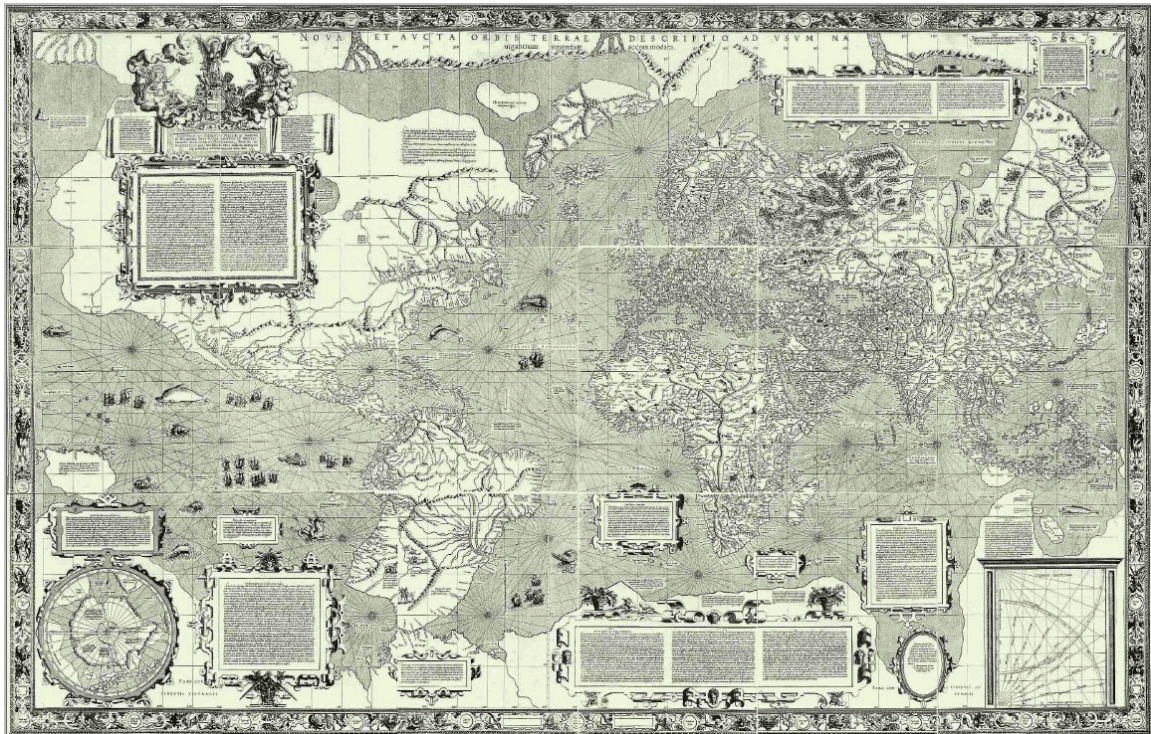


*Prester John on the Bartolomeo Olives' chart of the south coast of Africa and Madagascar
1538-1588*

This confusion over the nature of Prester John's existence did not resolve itself quickly. German polymath Gerardus Mercator, whose first priority was scientific accuracy, felt the need to mention Prester John on his world map of 1569. Moreover, he felt the need to definitively prove the location of Prester John once and for all. Mercator's map represents a giant leap in the slow modernization of mapping that we have seen sluggishly taking place on the previous maps – even considering the century that had passed. Despite the application of sophisticated mathematics, the map is in many ways still a transitional one. Mercator tells us on his map that he felt indebted to established sources, such as Ptolemy and Marco Polo. As William Hansard states, in relying on these traditional but misguided sources, Mercator failed to purge many medieval elements from the map. This juxtaposition is nowhere more evident than in the inclusion of Prester John.

Mercator devotes a large block of text dedicated to the history of Prester John and the origins of the Tartars, who destroyed his empire. Mercator summarizes accepted information that had been chronicled by famous travelers. He then uses this information to claim that the Prester John in Asia is not the same Prester John as the "Prete Giam" that reigns in Africa. While there existed in Asia rulers that fit the description of Prester John, the "true" Prester John ruled in Ethiopia. Mercator's compiled research finds that the Asian Prester John was actually a succession of kings of an Oriental empire, an idea gaining much traction at the time. Still, he does not contend that Prester John must not exist, which he might well have concluded through his research. With this deft textual

maneuvering, as Hansard states, Mercator was able to challenge and correct the previous body of work related to Prester John without completely dismantling it; he could not contest the powerful desire for Prester John to exist. Mercator's thought process shows a thorough attention to detail, yet his choosing to manifest Prester John as a human being is incongruent with his desire for geographic accuracy. His phenotype here is of Northern Europe, despite the fact that he rules in Africa. He sits on a throne of European make, wearing clothes that are European in style. That he holds a Christian cross aloft gives some authenticity, while emphasizing the dual nature of his power. The idea of a Prester John being African would not have been foreign to Mercator, as both the Catalan (#246) and Genovese (#248) maps depicted Prester John as African.

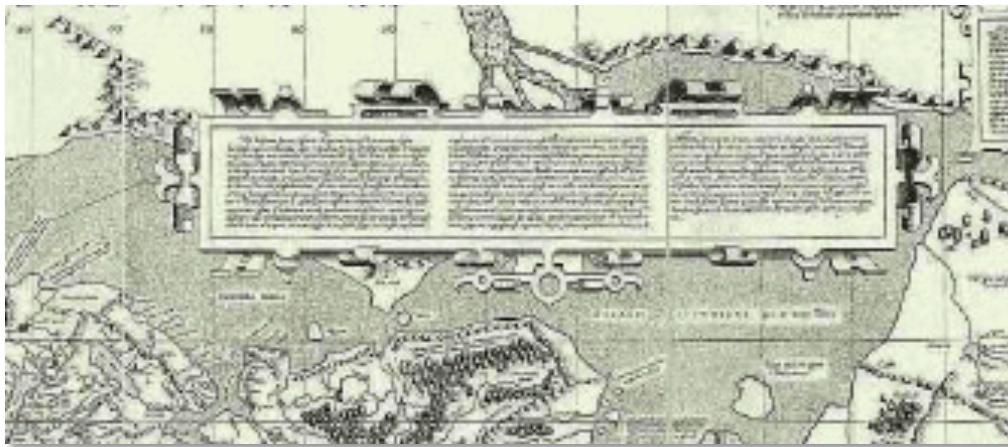


Gerard Mercator's famous 1569 world map based upon his new projection (#406)



Detail from Gerard Mercator's 1569 world map showing 'Prete Giam' [Prester John] in Africa.

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.



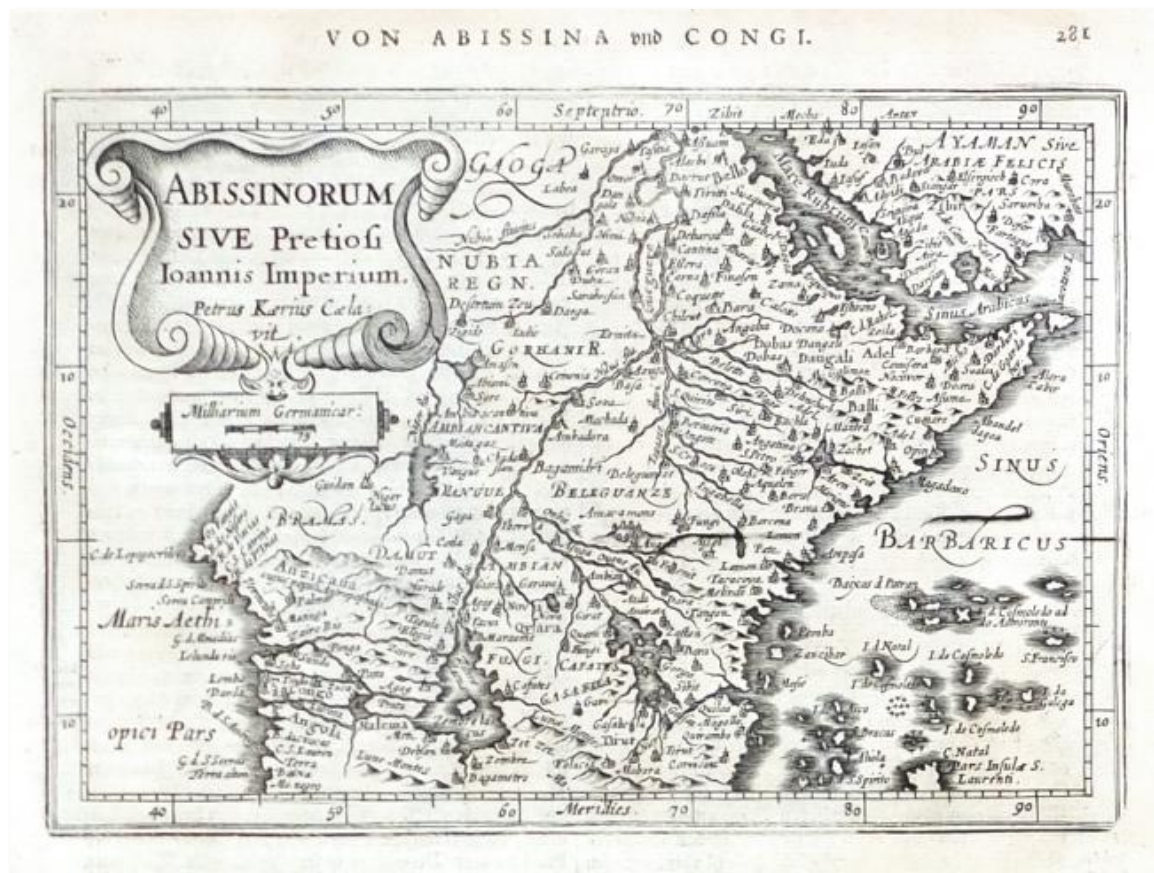
Mercator's legend of Prester John on his 1569 world map (upper right side)

At the time when Antioch in Syria was besieged and taken by the allied forces of the Christians in the year 1098 the sovereign of the eastern parts of Asia was Coir Cham. At his death a Nestorian priest and shepherd seized the dominion of the Naiman people in the country of Naïam and thereafter became the absolute master of the whole Orient and he was called, as indeed he was,

Priest and King John. When he died his brother Vuth, who reigned in the Carocoran, seized the power and called himself Cham, that is Master. As he feared the multitude and the growing power of the Sumongols, that is to say the aquatic Mongols who were properly called Tartars, from the name of the river Tartar of their homeland, though they had neither king nor state and were but shepherds who paid an annual tribute, he desired to disperse them into different countries thus breaking all power of rebellion; but they, unwilling to give up their right of kinship and of mutual association, made a vow and fled to the northward where they seized a very vast country, fortified by nature, in which they would be able to defend themselves, even though they refused to pay the tribute, and thus save their liberty. A few years later, as the other Mongols (as is related by William of Tripoli) were molested by the armies of their Emperor Vutcham, or else perchance were ill-treated on account of the suppression of the tribute of the Tartars, a Mongol working blacksmith called Chinchis, anxious to remove the common affront and to obtain liberation, invited the Jecmongols to rebel and called in the Tartars; after all had, with one accord, made resolutions he was elected king by unanimous decision in the year of Our Lord 1187. Shortly afterwards he invaded the countries beyond Mount Belgian and easily conquered the whole of this land for, being wise, he knew how to make full use of the victories, exercising no cruelties on the conquered and, to those who willingly gave their submission and who took service in his army, he granted their lives and allowed them to retain their wives and children and to have free enjoyment of all their goods. Thereafter, crossing Mount Belgian at the place where it meets the Ocean, he attacked the kingdom of Tenduc, the seat of the Emperor Vutcham. Having conquered him he became the monarch of the East. He lived six years after Vutcham during which he added numerous provinces to his empire. Thus the dominion passed to the Mongols and it is called the Empire of the Tartars, not only for that it was obtained because of and thanks to them, but particularly because all the Mongols who lived together under common laws were called Tartars. Vutcham and his descendants remained kings of Tenduc but paid tribute to and were under the dominion of the Tartars. We have briefly summarized this information gathered from Marco Polo, the Venetian, Hayton the Armenian and William of Tripoli, a Dominican of Ancona who, in the year 1275, was sent by Gregory X to the Tartars in order to ascertain the primal origin and the seat of the Tartar dominion and to determine the true personality of this Prester John who was believed to be still reigning in Asia and in order clearly to show that he was not the same as he who, till today, is called Prete Giam in Africa.



Prester John on Fleming Arnold van Langeren's map for Jan Huyghen van Linschoten's
Itinerario, 1595



Abissino Rum Sive Pretiosi Ioannis Imperiu (Map of Central Africa)
Hondius, Jodocus/Mercator, Gerard, Published by Hondius, Amsterdam, 1628

That seemingly unshakeable desire for Prester John to exist, either in Asia or Africa, lasted well into the Age of Exploration, against mounting contradictory evidence. Despite this transition, by the 17th century cartographic practices still had some ways to go. Nicolaes Visscher's *A New, Plaine, & Exact Mapp of Africa*, printed in Peter Heylyn's 1652 *Cosmographie* represents a larger trend in 17th century cartography of rendering religious beliefs an explicit part of geography.



*Nicolaes Visscher's A New, Plaine, & Exact Mapp of Africa,
printed in Peter Heylyn's 1652 Cosmographie*

Visscher's map of Africa, like so many others before him, reflects a clear attempt to modernize classical cartographic knowledge and practices while challenging them as little as possible. The coastal outlines and general shape are relatively accurate, but the interior of the continent includes a number of imagined features. Mystical elements have their place within Visscher's *Abyssinia* – which makes up about two-thirds of the African continent. Among the wonders are *Zair Lake*, inhabited by *Tritons* and mermaids, a region called *Fungi Cafates* populated by Amazons, and the *Mountains of the Moon* along the southern border. Almost the entirety of the Nile River is included within the borders of *Abyssinia*, evoking Prester John's rumored ability to control the flow of the Nile.

Combining Peter Heylyn's religiosity with Visscher's reliance upon the classics, while still attempting to merge these ideas with current knowledge of geography, led to yet another strange depiction of Prester John – or at least an analogue therein. Heylyn did not agree with Mercator's findings, and wrote a history opposite to Mercator's; the title of Prester John is rightly invoked when referring to rulers in central Asia, and to use it to refer to the Abyssinian emperor is erroneous. He also takes down the idea put forth by French scholar Joseph Scaliger, who had proposed that the title of Prester John rightfully belonged to the African king, who took the Asian empire by force, conquering other territories along the way, thus becoming the ruler of the "Three Indias". For Heylyn, Prester John could not be one man, and he certainly had nothing to do with Africa. Visscher, however, felt differently.



Detail of central Africa: Zair Lake, inhabited by Tritons and mermaids, a region called Fungi Cafates populated by Amazons

While the Abyssinian emperor is not depicted by Visscher on the landmass of Africa, he occupies a symbolic space. Visscher divides Africa up into six imaginary kingdoms, depicting the faces of their rulers in the borders of the map. In the top left is the "King of Abissines", which evokes Prester John. With two at the top and four at the bottom, Visscher's arrangement of African rulers does not correlate to geography. That the Abyssinian king is given a depiction at the top left offers him a special primacy. Although we are given a detailed close-up of his face, determining the intended ethnicity of the Abyssinian king is not simple. His facial structure is ambiguous. His skin color is dark, but less dark than in other contemporary depictions of sub-Saharan Africans. His hair is short and tightly curled, deeply black. His garb complicates things yet further. Four of the remaining five African kings are clad in native decorations, including feathers, bones, piercings and stones. The "King of Marocca" is an exception, depicted as Arabic both in complexion and garb; he sports a well-groomed handlebar moustache and goatee, and wears a turban for a



crown. The King of *Abissines*, however, does not wear decorations that make sense geographically. His crown is crafted of expensive cloth framed with precious metal and adorned with extensive gems and *Fleurs-de-Lis*. All things considered, the depiction of the Abyssinian king betrays its medieval European origins, and Visscher makes clear his reliance on the old legends of Prester John.

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 no wonder that Visscher was influenced by these legends. Throughout the centuries, European travelers told and retold the tale of Prester John. Marco Polo, for example, claimed that Prester John's empire was no more, that it had existed in East Asia but was destroyed by Genghis Khan in the grandest battle that mankind had ever seen. Clearly Marco Polo did not end the search for Prester John with his account, but rather fueled it further. The search for Prester John was also a spark that ignited the flame of Iberian exploration. Most importantly, in the 14th century, Portuguese sailing expeditions of Africa were given an explicit purpose of finding Prester John's empire; Henry the Navigator's official chronicler noted, "he not only desired to have knowledge of that land, but also of the Indies and of the land of Prester John, if he could." Later, Christopher Columbus would be influenced by the story of Prester John via Marco Polo, although whether or not Columbus truly believed that he would meet Prester John is unclear.

While Ethiopia was claimed for many years as the origin of the Prester John legend, most modern experts believe that the legend was simply adapted to fit that nation in the same fashion that it had been projected upon Ong Khan and Central Asia during the 13th century. Modern scholars find nothing about the Prester or his country in the early material that would make Ethiopia a more suitable identification than any place else, and furthermore, specialists in Ethiopian history have effectively demonstrated that the story was not widely known there until well after European contact. Czech Franciscan Remedius Prutky asked Emperor Iyasu II about this identification in 1751, and Prutky states that the man was "astonished, and told me that the kings of Abyssinia had never been accustomed to call themselves by this name." In a footnote to this passage, Richard Pankhurst states that this is apparently the first recorded statement by an Ethiopian monarch about this tale, and they were likely unaware of the title until Prutky's inquiry.

The Portuguese voyages to Africa from the late 15th century led to the modification and ultimately the dispelling of the myth which had partly inspired them. In 1484, the king of Benin told the Portuguese of a ruler named Ogàmé, a lord of lords, who lived 250 leagues east of Benin and gave his dependents a little cross to cement their friendship. This gave the Portuguese hope that they were close to finding the legendary ruler. In 1521, King Manuel of Portugal wrote to Pope Leo X to tell him that Portuguese captains had found Prester John in Ethiopia. Francisco Alvarez, who spent six years at the Ethiopian court of Lebna Dengel (David II) and Queen Helena, wrote an account which exploded many of the myths. Europeans began to realize that the

Prester's territory was not so vast, his people so Christian, nor his treasury as bottomless as they had dreamed.

As mentioned above, the first maps on which the legendary kingdom is mentioned or depicted are said to be published around 1310, but few of these maps have survived. Of course these earlier examples are not maps made by copperplate printing but manuscript maps, woodcut maps or even *portolans* [nautical charts]. The world map of 1489 by the German cartographer Henricus Martellus uniquely locates the realm of Prester John in China with the inscription *Hic dnatur Presbiter Johannes imperator totius Indie* (#256). The Diogo Homem *portolan* map of Africa and the East (1558), also shown below, has an inscription that refers to the many letters in which Prester John is always mentioned as the emperor of the three Indias. This vague geographical description allowed the legendary kingdom to move freely around the globe for many years to come. On his famous 1507 world map Martin Waldseemüller (#310) places Prester John in East Asia by displaying a series of shields with crosses inside.



Martin Waldseemüller's 1507 world map (#310)



Detail from Martin Waldseemüller's 1507 world map

One of the first maps depicting Prester John on his throne still known to us (albeit in only one copy in the Library of Congress), is Martin Waldseemüller's *Carta Marina* dating from 1516 (#320, see also below). Waldseemüller seemed to be a cautious man because according to a text on this map, it is not clear if the kingdom is located in Africa or India. Laurent Fries' world map of 1522, based on Waldseemüller's earlier work also shows Prester John (see below). This map is one of the first woodblock examples where Prester John is without doubt depicted on his throne in East Africa. Sebastian Münster's *Geographia* of 1540 (#381) also contains a map where in the East of the African continent another reference to the empire can be read: *Hamarich Sedes Prete Iohan* (The city of Hamarich was considered as the capital of the kingdom). On some of these maps, the two arms of the Nile that originate from the *Mountains of the Moon* flow through his kingdom (the correct situation of the three major lakes in that area: lake Tanganyika, lake Victoria and lake Malawi-Njasa was only further explored in the 19th century). The geography of the lakes and the *Mountains of the Moon* was even more slavishly copied by mapmakers than the legend of the Prester John empire, despite the corrections made by Filippo Pigafetta in 1591. It was only until the rise of the French map makers such as Guillaume Delisle and Jean Baptiste Bourguignon D'Anville in the early and mid 18th century, that the inner parts of Africa were left blank instead of depicting these legendary mountains and lakes as done before.

Although it gradually became clear that even the name 'Prester John' was a European invention rather than an Ethiopian reality, the myth lived on, inspiring writers from Shakespeare and Samuel Johnson to John Buchan and Umberto Eco.



The 1489 world map by Henricus Martellus (#256)



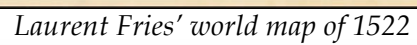
Detail from Henricus Martellus' 1489 world map showing Prester John in China, with the inscription *Hic dñat Presbiter Johannes imperator totius Indie*.

This inscription refers to the many letters in which Prester John is always mentioned as the emperor of the three India's. This vague geographical description allowed the legendary kingdom to move freely around the globe for many years to come.

Andrew Kurt in his article concludes that in the early 16th century, authentic knowledge of the Christian kingdom west of the Horn from travelers to and from Ethiopia, or from reports in the Indian Ocean region, was loosening the grip of Europe's fixation with an African Prester John. Valentym Fernandez Alemão's 1502 Portuguese translation of Marco Polo offered sound information on Ethiopia in the editor's additional notes, but despite the title commonly attached to the king of that land, Fernandez refuted that he was either '*Preste Joham*' or *Indian*; the real Prester John was, as Polo said, a ruler in Cathay, a Nestorian Christian of St Thomas who long ago was defeated by the great Khan.¹¹⁵ Some could still believe, however, convinced by the clever explanation of one of the royal titles by an Ethiopian envoy to Portugal in 1527: *jan belul* should be interpreted as 'Precious John'. It was enough to convince, among others, Marianus Victorius, the author of *Omnium Aethiopiae regum qui ab inundatio terrarum orbe usque ad nostra tempora imperarunt*, published 25 years later in Rome. Illustrative of both camps on the question, the distinguished cosmographer Sebastian Münster equivocated. On the one hand he deemed 'the identification of Ethiopia with the kingdom of the *Epistola Presbyteri Joannis* [to be] an amusing rusticity'; yet the Africa of his world maps in the 1540s places below Nubia these words between two branches of the Nile: '*Hamarich sedes Preste Johan*' [Amhara, seat of Prester John].

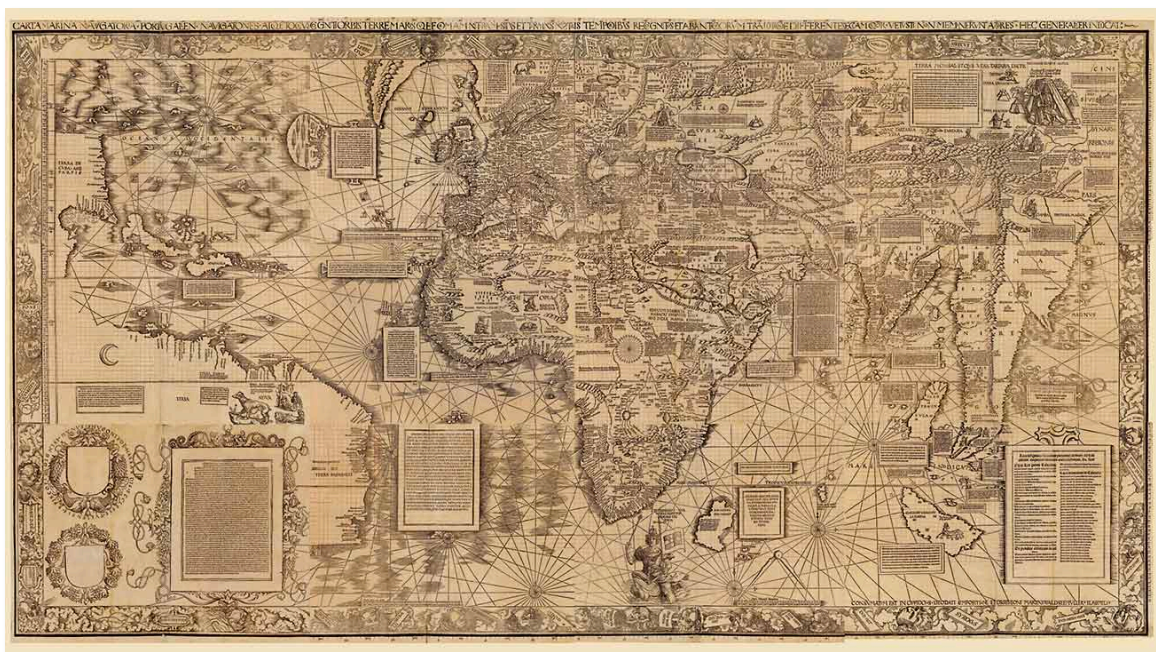
More accurate knowledge of Ethiopia eventually led to a fading of the legend. For a while, Prester John offered a ray of hope. The kingdom in Ethiopia matched the taste for the exotic that was part of the search for Prester John, but it fell far short of utopia and failed to make a serious ally against the Islamic powers. The elevated status of the monarch in European minds was deflated. Portugal's own successes in the Indian Ocean in the first half of the sixteenth century and the many European discoveries unfolding at the time took the wind out of the sails of an Ethiopian Prester John. But the story proved powerful enough to carry on for several more decades, and the trick was to combine fantasies and facts or in one case to combine it with a different location, Zimbabwe, a place that was conveniently not well known. As Vasco da Gama made his exploitative demands on foreign port cities during his second voyage to India, the flow of Monomatapa's gold through Sofala led the eyewitness Portuguese chronicler Thome Lopes in 1504 to identify the nearby mines with the biblical Ophir tapped by Solomon and to imply that the Queen of Sheba obtained her gold there. Even so, the chronicler relates that the queen is said to be from India, perhaps the old meshing of terms or a new dislocation from the Prester John inside the Horn of Africa.

The Portuguese house of Avis spearheaded the royal search for the priest-king in Africa, not merely out of curiosity but as a central part of a late crusade that aspired to bring Islam to eventual ruin. Perhaps outshone by the likelier promise of immediate gain in the lands soon known as the real India, nevertheless the quest was key to the new hegemonies in the region and back home. The goal of religious triumph in alliance with Prester John could not survive the reality in Ethiopia. But the fact that the representation of Prester John there continued in the expanding cartographic industry of the exploration age is testament to all that Prester John embodied: earthly perfection, exceptional riches, natural wonders, the desire to overcome Islam, and a Christian universalism that extended from perhaps the 13th century to a remote mountainous corner of Africa, to which should be added the enigma of black skin.





Detail from Martin Waldseemüller's 1516 Carta Marina showing Prester John in Africa (below is the complete Carta Marina, #320)



Since the Portuguese were very keen to make contact with Prester John during the 15-16th century, the kingdom of Prester John also appears in the nautical atlas of Portuguese cartographer Diogo Homem (active c. 1530-1576) who presented it to Queen Mary of England in 1558 (#395).

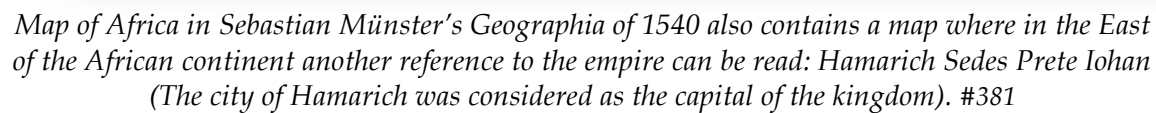


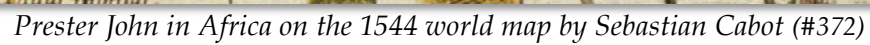
On the map in *portolan* style depicting the Indian Ocean, Prester John, shown above, is seated on a golden throne in East Africa and holds a scepter topped by a large cross. The coastlines were very well known and this *portolan* quite logically shows a lot of coast towns that were so important to the Portuguese merchants. In contrast with this are the vast empty areas of the African mainland.



One of the most encountered examples is possibly Abraham Ortelius' map of 1573: *Presbiteri Johannis sive Abissinorum Imperii Descriptio*. Ortelius designed this map himself, using geographical information from Jacopo Gastaldi's 1564 eight-sheet wall map of Africa, and introduced texts in it from unknown sources. Ortelius does not show Prester John on his throne but speaks of the mountains of Amara where the sons of Prester John are held in captivity. In the large cartouche on the left, Ortelius provides the reader with a list of Prester John's official titles. For example, it can be read that Prester John is a descendant from the great King David. Jan Huyghen Van Linschoten (1563-1610) who visited the east coast of Africa many times, tells in his history of travels, the *Itinerario*, that Prester John resided most often in the city of *Beimlechi* in East-Africa. More or less the same text about Prester John's sons can even be read on one of the maps of Van Linschoten's *Itinerario*: *Amara mons hic Aethiopie imperatoris filii et nepotes in custodia a praesidiis detinentur*.

The map of Ortelius became a kind of gold standard to depict the empire of Prester John because many mapmakers used the map of Ortelius as a reference for their own atlases.







A 1573 printed map entitled "Presbiteri Iohannis, sive, Abissinorum Imperii Descriptio" by Abraham Ortelius

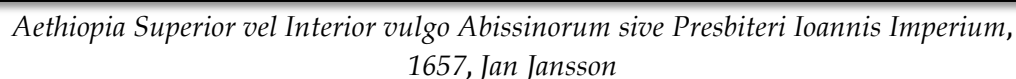
The *Pererguson*, Ortelius' atlas of ancient geography must be regarded as a personal work. In the *Theatrum* he used the works of other cartographers, but he drew the originals for this series to illustrate and clarify the history of classical civilizations. Being a collector of coins, the subject was very dear to his heart. The maps for the *Pererguson* were usually found as a supplement to the larger, modern maps found in the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*. This placement of Prester John's kingdom in Africa was spurred in part by the existence of Nestorian Christians in Ethiopia, who were soon identified with the subjects of the mythical Prester John. In Ortelius' day the search for this mythical kingdom was still used to justify expeditions along the coast and into Africa. The map shows from the Mediterranean to the Mountains of the Moon. The decorations on this beautiful map are some of the most interesting among the works of Ortelius: elephants in the interior, whales, a warship with lateen sails, and two magnificent cartouches are part of the great appeal. For its historic interest and decorative appeal, this is a gem of the age of exploration and discovery. In the text on verso, Prester John is proclaimed "without doubt in our age one of the great monarchs of the world." In the large cartouche at the upper left, Ortelius provides genealogical information on Prester John that claims his descent from King David. In the same cartouche, Ortelius supports the Ethiopian royal family's assertion that they descended from the queen of Sheba, a wayfaring lady whose history includes a legendary union with King Solomon.



Abissino Rum Sive Pretiosi Ioannis Imperii (Map of Central Africa)
Hondius, Jodocus/Mercator, Gerard, 1628

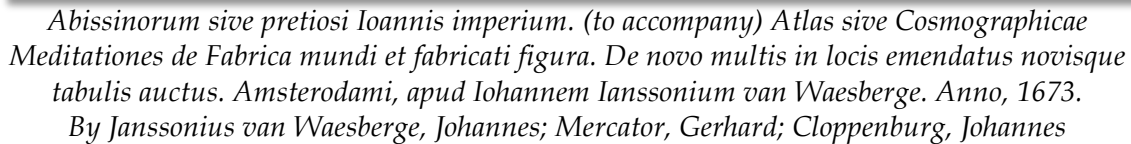
The map of Prester John's realm is largely based on the account of Duarte Lopes (1591) and its transcription by Filippo Pigafetta. It is worth noting that Hondius believed that the kingdom of Prester John merited its own page in the atlas, one of the few kingdoms that was so honored. The map is typical for early-to-mid-17th 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 landmass 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.

This map of central Africa, shows the Red Sea in the east and the horn of Africa, extending as far south as Lake Zaire, showing the Nile. Showing Zanzibar and the other islands of the Indian Ocean. Text in French on verso. With an inset titled *Congi Regni in Africa Christiani Nova Descriptio*., showing the west coast of Africa. With ornate title cartouche at lower left, scale cartouche at the right. From the Hondius edition of the Mercator Atlas.



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In spite of fervent beliefs, the trends in geographic thought over these several centuries did not bode well for Prester John. Slowly but surely, a cultural shift took place in which partisan theological and cultural elements on the map were purged in favor of a more objective geographic reality. However, it cannot be overstated just how pervasive the legend of Prester John was. Even into the Enlightenment, there were cartographic works – such as atlases by Dutch publisher Pieter van der Aa – that included Prester John as a real historical figure.



'L'Afrique selon les nouvelles observations [Map of Africa according to the latest observations]
by Pieter van der Aa, 1725

However, according to Hansard it cannot be overstated just how pervasive the legend of Prester John was. Nevertheless, by the mid-18th century, the search for Prester John and attempts to define his identity had largely disappeared, Europeans' knowledge of geography and increased secularity greatly lessening his appeal. And so, a figure that had undoubtedly been a central fixture of medieval and Renaissance perceptions of reality finally faded into obscurity. Prester John disappeared from texts and from maps because he was no longer real, and he was no longer real because he had disappeared from the maps. The prospect of finding Prester John had long since vanished, but the tales continued to inspire through the 20th century. William Shakespeare's 1600 play *Much Ado About Nothing* contains an early modern reference to the legendary king, as does Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla*. In 1910 British novelist and politician John Buchan used the legend in his sixth book, *Prester John*, to supplement a plot about a Zulu uprising in South Africa. This book is an archetypal example of the early 20th century adventure novel, and proved very popular in its day. Perhaps because of Buchan's work, Prester John appeared in pulp fiction and comics throughout the century. For example, Marvel Comics has featured "Prester John" in issues of *Fantastic Four* and *Thor*. He was a significant supporting character in several issues of the DC Comics fantasy series *Arak: Son of Thunder*. The 1992 video game *Castles II: Siege and Conquest* contains a sub-plot involving the search for Prester John's kingdom.

Charles Williams, a member of the 20th century literary group the *Inklings*, made Prester John a messianic protector of the Holy Grail in his 1930 novel *War in Heaven*.

Prester John or, as he is referred to in the trilogy, King John the Presbyter, also features in Tad Williams' epic trilogy, *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* (1993) where Prester John unites most of humanity in the fantastical continent of *Osten Ard*, long before the events taking place in the novels. The Prester and his kingdom also figure prominently in Umberto Eco's 2000 novel *Baudolino*, in which the titular protagonist enlists his friends to write the *Letter of Prester John* for his adoptive father Frederick Barbarossa, but it is stolen before they can send it out. Eventually, Baudolino and company determine to visit the priest's wonderful kingdom, which turns out to be everything and nothing like what they expected.

One of the most important geographic enigma, of the Medieval and early modern period, was the kingdom of Prester John. The legend of a Christian Kingdom lost among Muslim lands was popular from the 12th century and continued long into the 17th. Prester John was supposedly descended from one of the three magi. Over time, the utopian kingdom of Prester John came to house a bevy of other fantastical objects, including the Fountain of Youth.

The idea of a Christian King, a Presbyter John, of immense wealth had been circulating since the mid-12th century, part of the rumors that swirled around the Crusades. The story received a boost from a mysterious letter sent to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I. The letter, supposedly written by John, describes his power, faith, and land. The letter circulated ca. 1165 and survives in nearly 100 medieval manuscript copies. Initially, Europeans thought Prester John's kingdom was in India, and later in Central Asia. Finally, in the early modern period, the search shifted to Africa, specifically in Christian Ethiopia.

The story and the desire to find the kingdom was ubiquitous across Europe for centuries losing steam only in the seventeenth century when antiquarians found that the Prester John story had no convincing ties to Ethiopia. Its popularity testifies to the anxieties within the Christian faith during an epoch when Christianity was fighting for survival in the Middle East, and when Christian Europe was often in conflict with Muslims in the Ottoman Empire and was encountering indigenous peoples, and their religious systems, around the world.

The Letter of Prester John (*Abridged*)

Sent to Emanuel of Constantinople in 1165

This is a Book that the King of India sent to the Emperor of Constantinople, in which many diverse strange things are understood, and in it there are new things that have never been found in other books, and never shall be found. And this is the force of that book.

I.—John the priest, by the might and strength of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, King of earthly kings, and Lord of lords, sends to him that stands in the place of God, namely, the Ruler of Rome, joy and greeting by the grace of poetry, and thereby rising to things that are above, It was told our majesty that thou lovest our excellence and the plenitude of our greatness; and we have learnt through our messenger that thou art fain to send us things that are amusing, and some that are pleasant, and, as I am a man, that is good in my sight. And of the things among us we send by our messengers other things to thee, and we send and desire to know whether thou hast the faith with us, and believest wholly in our Lord Jesus Christ.

II.—When those among us recognize that we are men, thy Greeks think that thou art a God. Yet, since we know that thou art mortal, and that thou art subject to human corruption, if thou dost desire any of the things that belong to joy, do thou notify it through thy messenger, and, by the wonted munificence of our bounty, thou shalt have it. Do thou take this gift, in my name, and make use of it, and we will joyfully use thy gifts, so that we may strengthen ourselves mutually in our power turn by turn, and, as proofs thereof bethink thee and look to it. If thou wouldst fain come to the nation whereof we are sprung, we will place thee over the greatest things in our palace, and so thou shalt make use of our abundance, and the many things that are in our midst, and if thou wouldst fain return, thou shalt go back rich. Remember, however, the last thing, that is, thy end, and thou wilt never more sin,

III.—Now, if thou wouldst fain know our majesty, and the excellence of our highness, and in what lands our power holds sway, understand and believe without doubt that I am John the priest, lord of lords, excelling all the kings of the earth in strength, and power, in all kinds of high riches that are under heaven. Seventy-two kings are tributary to me. I have taken a vow that I am a Christian; the greatest power of our righteousness is to defend and support them from our alms. We are likewise under vow to visit the sepulchre of our Lord with a great host, even as it befits the glory of our mightiness to subject and subdue the enemies of the Cross of Christ, and to exalt His Blessed Name. And our land stretches from the extremities of India, where the body of Thomas the Apostle rests; and it extends through the wilderness to the setting sun, and reaches back, sloping to deserted Babylon, near the tower of Babylon.

IV.—Seventy-two kingships serve us in bondage, and of those but few are Christians; and each of them has a king, by itself, and these are all tributary to us. In our country are born animals,—elephants, dromedaries, camels, hippopotami, crocodiles, metagalinarii, carne-nirri, ownsiritæ, pantheræ, onagri, white and red lions, white bears, white ousels, silent grasshoppers, gryphons, tigers, ogresses, hyenas, wild buffaloes, sagitarii, wild men, men with horns, chorniti, correre, satyrs, and women of the same race, pigmies, cenofali, giants forty cubits in height, one-eyed men, cyclopes, the bird that is called phoenix, and almost all the kinds of animals under heaven. In our country there is abundance of milk and honey; in another quarter in our land no poison hurts, no frog croaks, no snakes hiss in the herbage; no venomous animals can abide there, or do harm to anyone. In the midst of some races called Pagans, through one of our provinces, a river called Idon runs, and this river, after coming from Paradise, runs noiselessly through all that kingdom by various mazes. And here are found natural stones; these are their names, smaragdi,

saphiri, carbunculi, topazion, crysoliti, onichini, berilli, amethysti, sardinae, and many other precious stones.

V. — There springs the herb called Affidos. Whoever bears the root of that plant with him, it will drive the evil spirit from him, and will constrain him to say who he is, and what is his name; and, therefore, the evil spirits dare not corrupt any man there. In another kingdom of ours there grow all kinds of pepper, and they are collected and exchanged for wheat, and skins, and cloth, and men's food; and those regions are wooded, as if thickly planted with willows, and all full of serpents. And when the pepper ripens, all the people come from the nearest kingdoms, and bring with them chaff, and refuse, and dry branches; and they kindle the wood round about; and when a mighty wind blows, they set fire within and without the wood, so that not one of the snakes may escape; and so within the fire, after it has been thoroughly kindled, all the snakes perish, save those that reach caves; and when all the fire has died out, all come, men and women, small and big, with forks in their hands, and fling all the snakes out of the forest, and make high heaps of them sky high. And when they have finished shaking that refuse, the grain that is gathered from among the fagots is dried, and the pepper is boiled, but how it is boiled no one from another country is allowed to know.

VI.—And that forest is situate under Mount Olympe, and from there an excellent spring flows; and the water has every kind of taste, and the taste changes each hour, day and night. And from there, not further than three days' journey from Paradise, from which Adam was driven out. Whoever drinks of the water of that spring during his fast, no disease will come upon him from that day forth, and he will ever be thirty years of age. There, too, there are stones called Midiosi; and eagles bring these towards us, and through these they revive and recover the light, if they lose it. Whoever bears this stone on his hand, light never fails him, and if he would fain hide himself, it will cause that no one may see him. It drives hatred from all, and induces unity, and repels jealousy. This, too, is a strange thing that our country has, among other things: — there is a sea of sand there, and the gravel moves without water, and it surges in waves like another sea, and never rests; and one cannot go on it by vessel or in any other way, nor can it be in any way known what kind of laud there is beyond; but on the side towards us there are found divers kinds of fish, so sweet and so good that man never saw their like.

VII. — There are likewise, three days' journey from that sea, some mountains from which flows a river of stones, and that flowing like water, and it runs through our land to the sea of sand, And when the river reaches the sea, the stones disappear, so that they are not seen thenceforth. Three days in the week the stones move and slide, both small and great, and take with them some trees, as far as the sea of sand, and, so long as they move, no one can ever cross it; on the other four days a passage is obtained. This is another marvel that is there; hard by the desert near the mountains, where no one dwells, there is a river beneath the earth, and no one can find a road to it, except by chance; sometimes the earth trembles, and whoever then happens to be passing by can find a road to the river, and he must travel in haste, lest perchance the earth close upon him; and whatever sand he brings with him will be precious stones and jewels. And this river runs into another river larger than itself, and therein there is none of the gravel or sand, but precious stones; and into this river the men of that country go, and seize and bring with them thence a multitude of precious stones and jewels, and they dare not sell those, until they first inform our excellency. And if we would fain have them in our treasure, we take them, and give them half their value. If we do not want them, they are free to sell them where they will. Children are brought up in that land to seek the stones, so that they can live under the water three or four mouths,

VIII.—Beyond this stony river there are ten tribes of the Jews. Though they presume they are kings, yet they are subject to us, and are tributaries to our majesty. In another kingdom of ours, beyond the place where the island lies, there are worms, called in our tongue Salamandre, and

those worms can live only in fire, and they have around them skins like the skins of worms that make silk. And to spin this is the work of our ladies in our palace, and thereof is made all kinds of apparel for the use of our majesty; and these clothes cannot be washed save in a large and strong fire. In gold, silver, precious stones, in dromedaries and camels, is the abundance of our greatness. No one is poor among us; no adulterer is found there; all men of strange lands, to wit, guests and pilgrims, our gentleness receives. No thieves, no oppressors, no misers are found in our midst; there is no envy in our midst.

IX.—Our men have abundance of all kinds of riches; there are not many horses among us, and they are but sorry. We liken none on the face of the earth to us in riches. When we go to war in force against our enemies, we let carry before us fifteen large, magnificent crosses made of gold and silver, with precious stones therein, one in each car, in stead of standards, and behind each one of them twelve thousand men of arms, and a hundred thousand foot soldiers, without counting the five thousand who have to do with bearing food and drink. But when we walk abroad in peace, a wooden cross precedes our majesty, without any legend whatever, either of gold or silver, that the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ may be brought back to our remembrance constantly; and a vessel full of earth, that we may recognize that our flesh returns to its own source, that is, to earth; and other vessels, full of gold, are borne before us, that all may understand that we are lord of lords.

X.—In all the kinds of riches that are in the world our greatness abounds and excels. No one tells a lie among us, and no one can tell one; and whoever tells a lie willingly, straightway he dies, and no illwill is borne about him. All of us follow after truth, and all love one another mutually; no kind of sin reigns there. Every year we go on a pilgrimage to the place where lies the body of Daniel the Prophet, taking great hosts with us, to deserted Babylon, and those too under arms, because of animals called tyri and some other serpents called deviles. In our country some fish are caught, and with the blood of these the most precious purple is coloured.

XI.—We have many places, the bravest nation in the world, and ugly withal. We lord it over the races called Amazons and Bragmans. The palace wherein our majesty dwells was made in the form and likeness of that which the Apostle Thomas ordained for Wyndofforns, king of India; and its wings and structures are exactly like it. The columns of the hall, its pillars, and its fretwork, conic from some tree called ccthiui. The roofing of the hall is made of some plants called hebenus, the reason being that no one in the world can in any way burn it. On the farthest extremities on the top of that ball there are two apples of gold, and in each of them there is the precious stone called carbunculus, so that the gold may give light during the day, and the stones by night. The largest parts of the hall are made of stones called sardoniehi, blended with eerastes, the reason being that no one may secretly bring in poison with him. Other things in the hall are made of the plants called hebenus; the windows were of crystal; the tables to eat on in our palace are, some of them, gold, and others of the precious stone amestic. The pillars that support the tables are of whalebone. Before our palace there is a street, wherein our justice is wont to look on those who fight in duel. The top of the hall and its walls are made of onichiius, the purpose being that energy may arise in our combatants by the virtue of the stones. In that hall light is not kindled at night, save that which the precious oil called balsam feeds.

XII.—The chamber wherein our majesty rests was fitted with wondrous work, and that of gold, and every kind of precious stone in the world, because of the excellence of onichinus instead of light. Around this is made a work, four-square, as large as itself, that the harshness of the onyx may be tempered. Precious ointment is ever burned in this chamber; our bed is made of sapphire, because of the virtue of chastity. We have the fairest wives in the world, and they come in to us only four times in the year, that we may have heirs, and thereafter each one returns to her own place, as healthy as Beersheba from David.

XIII.—In our palace we eat once a day; each day thirty thousand men eat at our board, besides the guests that come and go. And these all receive their charges from our palace, both in horses and other things also. That table is made of precious stone called smaragdus, and it is supported by two pillars of amethyst. The virtue of this stone is that it suffers no one to get drunk so long as he sits thereon. Before the doorposts of our hall, near where the combatants are, there is a watch-tower of great height, and thereto one climbs by one hundred and twenty-five steps; and these steps, some of them are made of porphyry, blended with the blood of serpents, and alabaster ointment. The third part at the bottom of these is made of crystal, and jasper, and sardonyx, and another part, at the top, is of amethyst, and amber, and jasper, and sardonyx, and panthera. This watch-tower is supported by one pillar, and on this there is a base, that is, some stone-work so called, and on this base two columns, that is to say, arms; and on these there is a base, and on this four columns, and again a base, and on this sixteen arms; and so the work proceeds, until the number thirty-four is reached, and then the number of the bases lessens, and the columns, until they come to one, and that by ascending upwards, as they increased before, ascending to thirty-four.

XIV.—Now the columns and bases are of the same kind of precious stone as the steps through which men ascend. On the summit of the highest there is a watch-tower placed by some graceful skill, so that no one in the various kinds of laud subject to us can work any fraud, or treachery, or dissensions against us whatever, nor those among us, without it being clearly seen from that watch-tower, and without its being recognised who they are, or what they do. There are three thousand men of arms ever guarding this watch-tower night and day, lest by chance it be broken or overthrown to the ground.

XV.—Each month in the year seven kings serve me, each one of them in his order, and forty-two princes, and three hundred and fifty-six earls. That number is always at our board, without those placed in the various duties in our palace. At our board there eat each day, on the right twelve archbishops, and on my left hand twenty bishops, and the patriarch from the place where is the grave of the Apostle Thomas and he that is in place of a pope.

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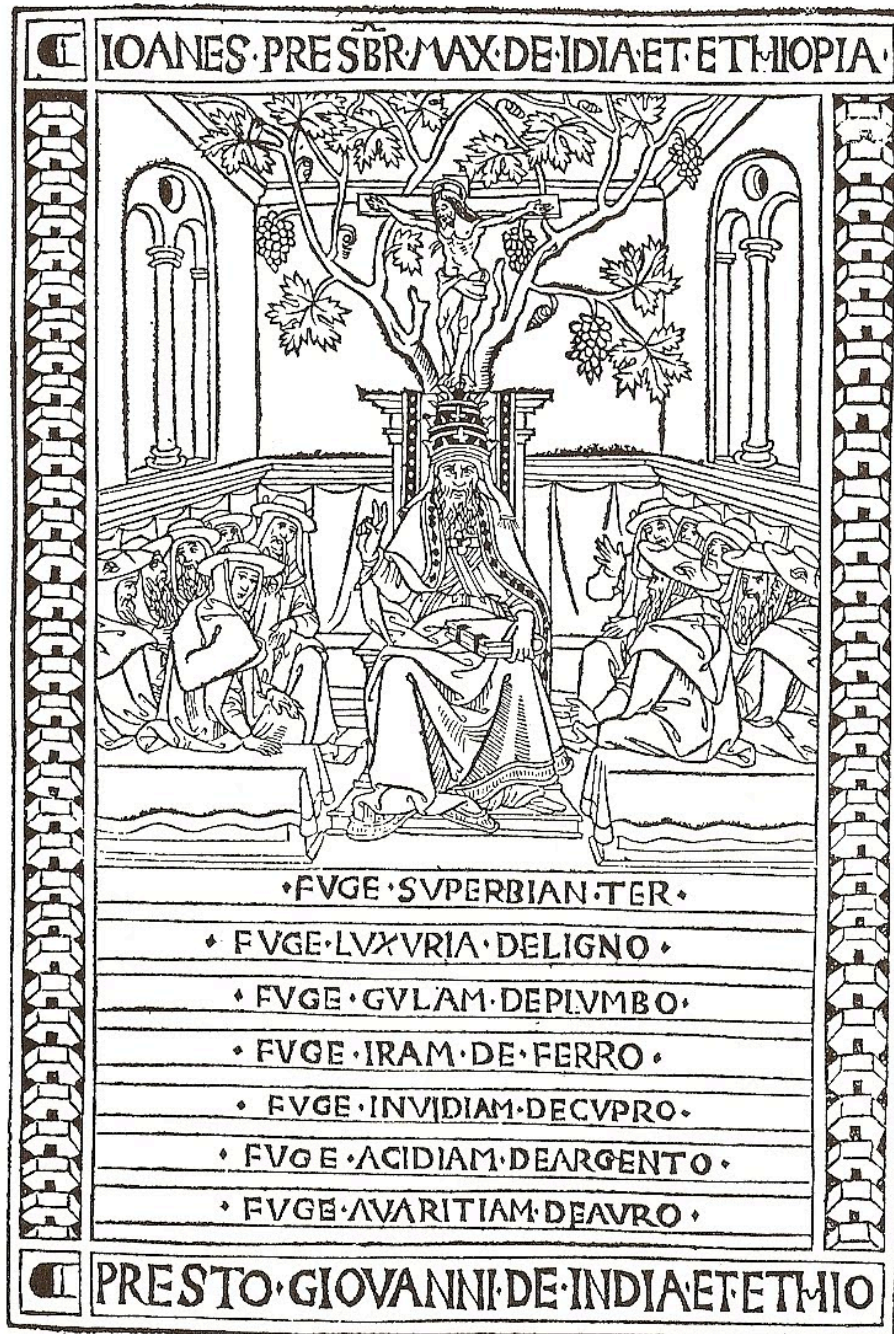
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**CLagran Magnificencia del Prete Ianni Signore dellindia
Maggiore & della Ethiopia**



A woodcut illustration of a late 15th century chapbook for some poems by Giuliano Dati, a prominent Italian poet. 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.