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The Global Legend of Prester John

Christopher E. Taylor



Cambridge Elements

Elements in the Global Middle Ages

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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009502030

DOI: [10.1017/9781009502016](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009502016)

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When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI [10.1017/9781009502016](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009502016)

First published 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-009-50203-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-50200-9 Paperback

ISSN 2632-3427 (online)

ISSN 2632-3419 (print)

Additional resources for this publication at <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/prester-john/index>.

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DOI: 10.1017/9781009502016
First published online: January 2025

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Abstract: *The Global Legend of Prester John* delves into the enduring fascination with Prester John, an unreachable, collectively imagined Christian priest-king who figured prominently in Europe's entrance into an interconnected global world. This Element draws on "The International Prester John Project," an archive of Prester John narratives, from papal epistles to missionary diaries to Marvel comics, all of which respond to the Christian heterotopia promised in the twelfth-century *Letter of Prester John*. During the medieval and early modern periods, the desire to legitimize the letter's contents influenced military tactics and papal policy while serving as a cultural touchstone for medieval maps, travel narratives, and romance tales. By providing an overview of distinct narrative paths the legend took, along with an analysis of the themes of malleability and elasticity within and across these paths, this Element addresses how belief in Prester John persisted for six centuries despite a lack of evidence.

Keywords: Prester John, Global Middle Ages, early globalities, medieval legends, the Crusades

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ISBNs: 9781009502030 (HB), 9781009502009 (PB), 9781009502016 (OC)
ISSNs: 2632-3427 (online), 2632-3419 (print)

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Introduction

For more than six centuries, missionaries and merchants, historians and poets, sought the legendary *rex et sacerdos* Prester John in the places where European desires for a globalized Christianity were most acutely aroused.¹ From the twelfth into the twenty-first century, the Latin Christian desire for a universal sovereign who guaranteed the continuity of Christianity outside of Europe's borders evolved into one of the world's most enduring myths. Prester John not only represented a distal military ally poised to defend Christendom but also embodied the hope that the heretofore unknown parts of the globe would be revealed to Latin Christians as extensions of the world that biblical and classical geographical authorities had foretold. The search for Prester John stressed the ideologies that his potential existence portended more than it focused on the geopolitical and sociocultural realities that the search for his kingdom unveiled. For these reasons, long after it was realistic to imagine his historical existence, writers continued to imagine Prester John's origin and arrival.

Was Prester John the "Nestorian" Patriarch of "Eastern" Christians,² the King of "Greater India," a political allegory of effectively shared sacred and secular rule, a messianic ruler of a religio-cultural heterotopia, the Latinized title of the Solomonic line of Ethiopian sovereigns, a Crusader intent on defending the Holy Land, the Dalai Lama? Writers postulated the existence of Prester John's kingdom in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, India, China, Mongolia, Tibet, Russia, Ethiopia, Benin, Sudan, and Japan, among other places. Indirectly and directly, the desire to find Prester John's kingdom helped shape Europe's notion of what the wider world looked like, even as emerging global realities subverted the expectations that had initially produced belief in Prester John.

The Global Legend of Prester John offers an overview of six distinct narrative paths the legend forged and examines the narrative mechanisms that encouraged writers and adventurers throughout Europe to continually imagine Prester John at the horizons of their known world. This feat of narrative endurance is grounded in a number of factors, including the legend's ambiguous historical foundations, the lack of communication among contemporaneous world travelers, the permeability of medieval generic constraints, not to mention the sheer desire, shared among explorers, thinkers, and writers, to

¹ Portions of this Element derive from Taylor (2023).

² Colloquially considered the de facto Christianity of the East, now considered the Assyrian Church, Nestorianism was labeled heresy by the Catholic Church primarily due to its Christological belief in dyophysitism, which asserted that Christ possessed separate human and divine natures, only loosely united. It was a canonical heresy, anathematized as early as the Council of Ephesus (431) and Council of Chalcedon (450), after having developed from the ideas of Nestorius (d. 450) and being disseminated by the School of Edessa.

assimilate a whole world's worth of encountered difference into a tidy Christian framework. Moving through the legend's narrative paths, I distinguish two abiding features evident in the narrative treatments of Prester John: malleability and elasticity.

The central text of the Prester John legend is itself one of literary history's most enduring texts, a constantly changing narrative that circulated in more than a dozen different languages by the early modern period. This letter allegedly penned by Prester John himself survives in varying iterations (classified by scholars as separate "interpolations") in an astonishing 469 extant manuscripts (234 Latin and 235 vernacular).³ The enormous popularity of *The Letter of Prester John* (*LOPJ* hereafter) helps contextualize the legend's cultural influence across Europe, while the variations within its transmission history testify to its malleability and wide applicability. Taken seriously as both a piece of entertainment and an instructional document, the *LOPJ* interacted with (and helped bridge) history and literature for 600 years. Maps featured Prester John's kingdom to reference what the "New" world looked like. Missionaries and explorers employed the physical and cultural landmarks of the *LOPJ* to help identify his kingdom's location. Writers assimilated Prester John into the Arthurian and Charlemagnian literary worlds. Literary worlds, in turn, borrowed from the *LOPJ* to lend verisimilitude to their descriptions of the periphery of Europe's known world (Putter, 1999: 93).

Versions of the *LOPJ* have been expertly edited,⁴ sequenced,⁵ translated,⁶ philologized,⁷ sourced,⁸ and analyzed.⁹ There is still more exciting work to be done on the *LOPJ*; it was for centuries a kind of living text. On the other hand, scholarly assessments of the texts that helped perpetuate the legend – texts that affirm who Prester John was and was not, texts that seek out his kingdom on three continents, texts that integrate him into other narrative universes – have been comparatively underexamined. Brewer's *Prester John: The Legend and Its Sources* (2015) masterfully collects, compiles, and translates many of these accounts. This resource has helped me identify some exciting patterns that

³ Brewer (2015: 299–319); Wagner (2000: 21–149).

⁴ Zarncke (1879: 872–908); Gosman (1982); Ullendorff and Beckingham (1982); Wagner (2000).

⁵ Zarncke (1879: 827–870); Wagner (2000); Ramos (2006: 29–36); Chiesa (2023).

⁶ English translations of varied manuscripts of the *LOPJ* include Ross (1926: 174–178); Slessarev (1959: 67–79); Vitale (1975: 62–124); Ullendorff and Beckingham (1982: 37–146); Uebel (2005: 155–160); Brewer (2015: 67–91).

⁷ Vitale (1975: 39–61, 137–144); Wagner (2000).

⁸ Letts (1945); Nowell (1953); Ullendorff and Beckingham (1982: 153–160); Hamilton (1996a: 177–180); Ramos (2006: 39).

⁹ Olschki (1931); Slessarev (1959: 32–54); Silverberg (1972: 40–73); Ullendorff and Beckingham (1982: 161–172); Uebel (2005: 89–122); Ramos (2006: 37–44).

emerge when tracing the relationships among and between the texts of the Prester John corpus. Such texts, here called Prester John narratives, merit closer attention for two overarching reasons. First, they evidence the cultural reception of Prester John, which, in turn, helps contextualize the various narrative paths that the legend built. Second, these stories keep the legend alive, continually producing new ways for Prester John to affect Christian Europe's economic and political future. Tracing such an evolution shows how the legend of Prester John reflects several of the ideologies that mobilize Europe's entrance into a globally interconnected world.

Methods and Key Terms

This Element is designed for nonspecialists and curious researchers who may have crossed paths with the legend in their studies. I am aware that, for especially those unacquainted with the themes of medieval and early modern history and literature, the sheer number of geographical, biographical, theological, and cultural references may threaten to impede understanding of the Prester John myth. Even Charles Beckingham, the veteran researcher of the legend, teased that its study is “as inexhaustible as any scholar's appetite is insatiable” (Beckingham, 1996: 22). Therefore, in addition to providing an overview of the writers and narratives that the legend of Prester John influenced, this Element offers an interactive experience that allows readers to learn more about any point of interest encountered in the course of reading this text.

In this capacity, the Element draws on my work on [The International Prester John Project](#) (IPJP).¹⁰ This digital platform hosted by the [Global Middle Ages Project](#) (G-MAP) began as an attempt to better understand the transmission of the Prester John legend across space and time.¹¹ I have since spent a decade collecting and organizing six centuries' worth of Prester John lore into a hybrid narrative and digital archive designed to function as a user-friendly resource on this legend. For e-readers of this Element, many texts, figures, and key ideas mentioned in what follows are hyperlinked to a corresponding page at IPJP, which provides additional context, analysis, and references to the pages of related texts, along with visualizations.¹² Such a format lets me continuously update contextual references to give this creaturely legend a living framework.

¹⁰ The International Prester John Project: How A Global Legend Was Created across Six Centuries (online), <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/prester-john/>.

¹¹ Global Middle Ages [online], <http://globalmiddleages.org/>.

¹² For print readers, please see the online Appendix hosted on a separate Cambridge University Press webpage to find URLs for hyperlinked pages. This Appendix contains an alphabetically organized accounting of pages referenced in this Element. Readers of both print and digital editions of this Element can also utilize the search bar within the International Prester John Project to locate any texts, authors, or ideas referenced in it.

These individual pages on IPJP provide readers with a more thorough overview and contextualization of texts, which are then tagged with all other Prester John pages that reference them. For example, clicking on (or searching for) Otto of Freising's *Historia de Duabus Civitatibus* not only provides additional historical background and scholarly assessment of the narrative but also contains embedded links to a number of related texts, navigates to thematic collections of narratives that concern Otto's chronicle ("Popes and Prester John"; "Prester John and 'Nestorianism'"; "Chronicles and Prester John"), and provides bibliographical references. This is the case for nearly all names, texts, and themes in this Element, whether or not they are hyperlinked. The primary purpose of this Element is to provide an achronological, thematically organized overview of a remarkably durable legend, but when supplemented with IPJP, I hope to also afford readers an opportunity to get lost in the archive of the massive Prester John corpus.

This Element represents the results of studying the patterns I have observed in putting together the IPJP archive. I have now cataloged hundreds of generically diverse texts written by authors of varied backgrounds, each attempting to add a sliver of clarity to the mysteries and promises teased within the *LOPJ*. Because of the diverse backgrounds of those who wrote on the legend, Prester John comes to serve often contradictory historical and ideological roles: Lord of Greater India, Ethiopian monarch, "Nestorian" Mongol,¹³ inherited title, literary character, utopian myth, and overblown rumor. In roughly the same decade that Wolfram von Eschenbach integrated Prester John into Arthuriana by making him the son of Feirefiz (Parzival's biracial half-brother), Jacques de Vitry prophesied the arrival of King David, the son or grandson of Prester John, as a potential savior to help the Christian army of the Fifth Crusade defeat Islam once and for all. To better explain the legend's expansions and contradictions, I distinguish two salient features of the legend that help account for its longevity: the elastic return to the legend's primary concerns across centuries of Prester John narratives and, relatedly, the malleability of the legend's epistemological framework. While it is not possible to neatly categorize all the variations one encounters in these Prester John narratives, in this Element I identify six distinct but permeable narrative paths that the legend followed, each of which contributes to a larger coherence by returning to these motifs of elasticity and malleability.

¹³ Although I am aware that contemporary scholars have called attention to the inaccuracy of the term "Nestorian" to describe members of the Assyrian or East Syrian Church, I employ the outdated term throughout the Element due to its close association with Prester John in several centuries of texts. For a fuller accounting of the term, please see the IPJP page on [Nestorianism](#).

The sheer variety of Prester John narrative styles, from skeptical dismissals to alleged firsthand encounters, attests to the malleability of this legend. That malleability, combined with Prester John's imagined movement from Asia to Africa and back, is made possible by the variety of ideological commitments that the legend trafficked among and between: xenophobia,¹⁴ solipsism,¹⁵ hybridity,¹⁶ apocalypticism,¹⁷ messianism,¹⁸ utopianism,¹⁹ among others. Travelers, writers, and readers from the thirteenth century forward were left with a legend that not only absorbed contradiction but encouraged revision. This is what I refer to as the legend's malleable narrative framework.

By elasticity here I mean that regardless of the shape a Prester John narrative took, the narrative paths "spring back" to the legend's initial configuration. This initial configuration of the legend is marked by four foundational themes: Latin Christendom's perceived need for outside assistance against foreign threats (Christian and otherwise), the receipt of some sort of future-directed pledge for assistance to aid against those threats, the attempts to enclose such threats within a larger Catholic framework, and the larger desire for the unknown parts of the world to be revealed as an extension of what was already familiar and known (Taylor, 2011).²⁰ Prester John remained entangled in Catholic Europe's understanding of its place in the world because it was adaptable to many contexts (malleability) and because the throughline crises and existential threats that produced the legend were never satisfactorily resolved (elasticity).

Finally, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by a Prester John "narrative" and "narrative path." For the purposes of this Element, a Prester John narrative is a text that features Prester John (or one of his [common aliases](#)) and offers an implicit or overt commentary on one or more of the legend's foundational themes. The term "narrative path" then refers to a group of Prester John narratives that share a common feature, whether of identification (Mongol or Crusader, for instance) or function (such as literary figure). This method of organization helps avoid the pitfalls that attend a chronological organization of Prester John stories, since one of the most interesting features of the legend is how often contradictory versions of the legend were being disseminated

¹⁴ Tolan shows how medieval xenophobia was often framed as ideological antagonism toward heresy (Tolan, 2002: 135–169); cf. Taylor (2011).

¹⁵ Uebel (2005: 93–102); Niayesh (2012: 158).

¹⁶ Uebel (1996: 274–282); Akbari (2012: 189–199).

¹⁷ Tolan (2002: 194–213); Ramos (2006: 202–210); Brooks (2010: 26–50).

¹⁸ Audlin (2015); Mantonavi (2023).

¹⁹ Olschki (1937); Helleiner (1959); Stromholm (1984); Bejczy (2001); Uebel (2001).

²⁰ This impulse is evident in the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the first Latin translation (and refutation) of the Qur'an (1143), as well as in the military strategies of the Second Crusade.

simultaneously. In choosing the term “path,” I also deliberately avoid discussion of genre, a modern construct, which is not only quite fluid throughout the Middle Ages but also obscures some of the interesting connections evident across different narrative forms. As I hope to show, these narrative paths are at once distinct and permeable.

Rather than create neat historical or generic categories to delineate different eras of the Prester John legend, this Element will focus on the ways that communities – Crusade advocates, Franciscan missionaries, Italian merchants, Portuguese viceroys, Hebrew scholars, armchair sinologists, Ethiopian courts, papal syndicates – patterned stories about Prester John around specific features of his character that then signaled some political, economic, and/or cultural utility. Each section will discuss the genealogy and transmission of one narrative path as a means of understanding how the legend of Prester John was able to thrive and evolve for centuries despite a proliferation of contradictory descriptions and a lack of evidence concerning his material existence.

Prester John and the Global Middle Ages

Before moving on to a discussion of the Prester John legend’s foundational themes, it is necessary to assess to what degree Prester John, an imaginary priest-king who mattered almost exclusively for Latin Europe, can be considered a “global” figure. A simple, unsatisfying answer is to report all the places where medieval and early modern Europeans sought Prester John’s kingdom: from the Asian Steppe to India, China, Russia, Tibet, and Japan; from Nubia, Benin, and Ethiopia to Columbus’ “New World.”

Such a Eurocentric view of early globalism privileges a Latin Christian experience with and response to intercultural connection. A representative perspective is attested in a 1710 English translation of Portuguese Jesuit historian Balthazar Téllez’s *The Travel of the Jesuits in Ethiopia* (1660), which summarizes what Portugal had itself gained from the world in its search for Prester John (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 241):

The Portuguese Nation having extended their Discoveries and Conquests along the Coasts of Africk, and proceeded thence to the, before unknown, remotest Eastern Shores; Europe was not only enrich’d with the precious Spices and other valuable Commodities of those Parts; but improv’d with the Knowledge of new Monarchies and Empires, Spacious Provinces, Wealthy and Large Islands, Warlike Nations, and variety of Countries, to which the ablest Cosmographers were before utter Strangers; so that we may say, the World is beholding to the Portugueses for this increase of Wealth, and addition of Extent.

In such a view, it is the world itself that benefits from the European extraction and acquisition of Africa's and Asia's resources and knowledge: global access understood as a means of proto-nationalist self-empowerment. While certainly worthy of study, this vantage on globality routinely offers a myopic and/or overly bellicose perspective: intercultural exchanges couched in terms of conquest, heresy, access, legend, a missionary eye. On the other hand, the global history of Prester John makes evident the way Latin Christendom gathered the slow trickle of global news that entered Europe, often through the Mediterranean, and then filtered such tidings through an inherited ideological framework that reflected desires for a globalized Christendom. And yet the terrestrial and textual excursions to seek Prester John's kingdom did, in fact, open up Europe's engagement with the wider world, encouraging reciprocated diplomatic missions and inaugurating new intercultural communication from cultures across Asia and Africa. An important vector in Europe's attempt to enter a global information economy, Prester John remained poised at key moments in this history of globalization, tied up with proto-colonial excursions to the Indian subcontinent, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Americas.

In addition to its influence on Europe's vision of the wider world, the story of Prester John's textual migrations engages with key themes in the historiography of global history. The legend aligns well with the so-called vectors of connectivity that have been identified as essential to the wider project of global history: diffusion, outreach, dispersal, expansion, and attraction (Belich, Darwin, and Wickham, 2016: 3–23). The notions of dispersal and expansion merit comment as an effective parallel framework for my concept of elasticity. The authors liken these two forces to “a stretched rubber band, which either breaks into fragments or remains intact” (p. 5). One way to put in perspective the irrational longevity of the Prester John legend is to understand it as a rubber band that continuously expanded as it was stretched but almost always “snapped back” to its initial shape.

Finally, this is a legend globally studied from a wide variety of academic lenses. It was once nearly only academic historians of medieval Latin Europe who studied Prester John. However, in the twenty-first century, interest in this legend has steadily grown, and the collective understanding of its impacts has been made clearer by researchers from an expanding variety of academic specialties. This phenomenon was well-represented by a 2023 conference at Sapienza University of Rome entitled “Retelling Prester John: Frontiers, Routes, and Emotions of a Failed Encounter,” based on a bilingual issue of *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* (ed. Ferrara, 2023), which featured scholars from disciplines and specialties that include literary studies, anthropology, the history of religions, world mythologies, medieval Latin philology, crusading

history, Greek studies, Jewish philosophy, Syrian literature, Byzantine and Islamic history, late Ottoman history, and Tibetan studies, among other specialties. As often as possible, I defer to such experts.

After a brief treatment of the legend's foundational texts and themes, this Element proceeds along the following six paths: "Prester John as Crusader"; "Prester John as Mongol"; "Prester John as African Monarch"; "Pop History Prester John"; "Prester John as Literary Figure"; and "False Etymologies, Prester John as a Title, and the Dalai Lama." The paths themselves focus on the specific narrative features that distinguished that version of Prester John, and they will also discuss textual features that attest to an abiding preoccupation with the foundational themes of the legend established in the twelfth century. Following these sections is a coda on race in the Prester John legend with a concluding discussion of two twentieth-century Prester John narratives that help clarify this legend's place in modernity.

Before moving on to the path sections themselves, the following section reexamines the initial context of the Prester John legend to establish four abiding thematic features of the Prester John story that reemerge across the six narrative paths.

Foundational Texts and Themes

Patriarch John

As is well-rehearsed, the traditional beginnings of the Prester John legend involve four core texts: two 1122 narratives that mention the arrival to Rome of an Indian Archbishop of *St. Thomas Christians* who presides over annual miracles; the retelling of a historically mistranslated 1145 anecdote regarding a puissant so-called *Nestorian* Christian who has announced intentions to defend the Holy Land (1157); and the legend's central narrative, the boastful, ever-expanding compendium of European lore about the wider world's marvels known as *The Letter of Prester John* (c. 1165). These four texts establish a range of possibilities concerning the identity and intentions of the mysterious priest-king: a figure of some historical repute but one also who traffics in the moth-eaten imaginings of a millennium's worth of European writing on the "Orient."

In the first of these 1122 texts, commonly referred to as *De adventu*, a man hailing from *India* known as Patriarch John arrives to the *curia* of Pope Calixtus II (r. 1119–1124) in Rome.²¹ Introducing himself to the pope, John reports the vast

²¹ John had originally traveled to Constantinople to seek recognition as the new Patriarch of the Indies. There he came into contact with a papal embassy sent to negotiate the reunification of the churches after the Great Schism (1054). John then traveled to Rome with the Catholic embassy.

wealth and power of Hulna, his Christian kingdom guarded by the shrine of *St. Thomas*, which produced miracles in the surrounding area. A contemporaneous letter written by Odo of Rheims (1118–1151), abbot of St. Remy, addressed to a “Count Thomas” affirms *De adventu*, corroborating the miracles attributed to St. Thomas. In both texts, Patriarch John’s visit to Rome testifies to a commitment toward a global Christendom; in addition to acknowledging the authority of the Catholic Church, Patriarch John actively advocates for the reunification of Eastern and Western churches.²² Both texts also make explicit that these Indian Christian communities of “St. Thomas Christians” remain hostile only to non-Christians.

Most Latin Christians would not have been familiar with the tradition of St. Thomas, as the *Acts of Thomas* and *Gospel of Thomas* were probably written in third-century *Edessa*, likely in Syriac. It was not until the era of Prester John that popular Latin legends about St. Thomas began circulating in the West; this renewed interest either was a product of or led to the twelfth-century Latin translation of the *Acts of Thomas*. Latin Christians thereafter became familiar with Jesus’ instruction for Thomas to proselytize Christianity in the East, as recorded in the *Acts of Thomas*.²³ The Apostle Thomas provided Patriarch John with an Eastern Christian forebear that helped Latin Christian readers maintain the powerful expectation of an already Christian East.

Presbyter Iohannes

Some twenty years after the two 1122 narratives, a well-connected German bishop and historian continued the story of the Eastern Christian potentate by folding the Indian Patriarch into crusading discourse. In a passage recorded in 1145 in *Otto of Freising’s* universal history, the *Historia de duabus civitatibus*, the third core Prester John text, Otto furnishes an anecdote concerning a Nestorian Christian “*rex et sacerdos Iohannes*,” hailing from the distant East of the *Magi*, who had recently conquered Persia and headed West in order “to move to the aid of the church in Jerusalem” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 43, 45).²⁴ Unfortunately, a flooded Tigris River prevented him from aiding his Latin Christian brethren.

²² Ramos argues for the link between Prester John and the Thomas legends (Ramos 2006: 183–192). Uebel theorizes the connection between Prester John, St. Thomas, and the psychoanalytic fetish (Uebel 2002: 55).

²³ The story in which Jesus sends Thomas to India to preach the Gospel is present in some older European medieval Christian texts, including Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* (fourth century), and it is difficult to discern how familiar this association with St. Thomas would have been prior to the twelfth century.

²⁴ Otto overheard this story from a fellow bishop, *Hugh of Jabala* (Lebanon). Hugh, in the presence of *Pope Eugenius III* (r. 1145–1153) in Viterbo, had himself overheard this account.

Otto's anecdote establishes a tension foundational to the legend's malleability and endurance. On the one hand, Prester John was described as an example of living biblical history, given his new tie to the Magi.²⁵ On the other hand, he had yet to provide the aid he had promised. Even worse, he practiced a heretical form of Christianity during a low point of ecclesiastical tolerance for such things.²⁶ By the twelfth century, Nestorian communities could be found from Alexandria to Beijing, but it was the religion's association with Edessa that best fits the context in which the legend was produced, given especially the Apostle Thomas' links with Edessa.²⁷ In addition to its association with Nestorianism and with holding the tomb of St. Thomas, Edessa had been the first Crusader County established after the First Crusade, though in 1144 it had fallen to Sunni Zengids, which led, in turn, to the preaching of the Second Crusade.

Although it appears unlikely that such an anecdote could generate centuries of hope and desire, Otto's *Iohannes* was a figure crafted with thick associative details that sent exciting, if contradictory, messages. This *Iohannes* was a man who acknowledged the urgent needs of his European brethren in their ongoing battle against Islam but one who had also proven capable of delay. He hailed from the land of the biblical Magi, but little was known in Europe about these exotic figures. Here was a universal sovereign who advocated for the reunification of the church and modeled the extreme reach of the faith but who himself practiced a heresy tantamount to that of Islam.²⁸ The account of an Eastern anti-Islamic leader described by Otto, and independently recorded by the Jewish traveler and merchant [Benjamin of Tudela](#) (c. 1164–1173), echoed the 1141 deeds of the [Qara Khitai](#), a nomadic Chinese tribe descending from northeast China. Hardly a group of Catholic-curious Christians, the Qara Khitai were mostly a mix of Nestorians and Muslims who represented the vestiges of the Chinese Liao dynasty and had recently established an empire in Central Asia. Their leader at the time, Yeh-lü Ta-shi, and his army had defeated an army of Seljuk Turks, but they were poised to be conquered by [Genghis Khan](#) in 1218.

Even as this historical event was laundered by go-betweens to reimagine a figure who might address European exigencies, this narrative establishes the geographical and ideological connections that become integral to two future

²⁵ The notion of the Magi as Christian kings did not exist at this point. It was only after the twelfth-century expansion of the St. Thomas legends that they became understood to have been Christianized by the Apostle Thomas.

²⁶ [Nestorianism](#) was considered a particularly abominable heresy by the medieval Catholic Church. The term "Nestorian" became synonymous with, if not epitomized by, the term "heretic" in the twelfth century.

²⁷ The *Acts of Thomas* was likely written in Edessa and asserts that St. Thomas was buried in Edessa.

²⁸ One twelfth-century text even referred to Muhammad as the "Nestorius of the Agarenes [Muslims]" (qtd. in Tolan, 2002: 138).

narrative paths: Prester John as Crusader and Mongol Prester John. Otto's anecdote was able to situate this Nestorian *Presbyter Iohannes* not as a potential foe to Catholic Europe but as the enemy of Latin Christendom's enemy (Taylor, 2011).

The Letter of Prester John

Around 1165, copies of a letter that would come to be known as *The Letter of Prester John* (LOPJ) began to circulate around present-day Germany. Addressed to the Byzantine emperor Manuel Comnenus (r. 1143–1180), these letters create the effect of heisted intelligence. In the LOPJ, the self-described priest-king boastfully announces himself as a devout Christian ruler of a powerful kingdom from which he “dominates the Three Indies,” a twelfth-century descriptor that designated an immense, somewhat malleable geographical area understood roughly to encompass the territory from Ethiopia to China.²⁹ The bulk of the LOPJ integrates a millennium's worth of European travel lore about the East and positions John as a panoptical observer able to rein in a catalog of marvels within an explicitly Christian framework.³⁰ John's kingdom models a form of rule that domesticates even the most heterogeneous lands: Even though seventy-two kings pay tribute to him, the author boasts “few are made up of Christians” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 68). To maintain order in this heterotopia, John projects an ethos predicated on adherence to moral principles (temperance, humility) rather than confine himself to rigorous doctrinal allegiances.

Versions of LOPJ itself survive in 469 documented manuscripts (234 Latin and 235 vernacular) across six separate versions – often called “interpolations” – composed in eighteen different languages.³¹ The popularity of this text simply cannot be overstated: It was regularly read, copied, and disseminated across Europe in the early thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries. By sheer number of surviving manuscripts, LOPJ outpaces nearly every canonical secular medieval text.

²⁹ For more on the medieval understanding of the “Three Indies” (also called the “Three Indias”), see the IPJ page on the [Three Indies](#); see also Relaño (2002: 53–55) and Hamilton (1996b: 241–242).

³⁰ Almost every detail in the earliest versions of the LOPJ can be found in, if not traced to, an earlier twelfth-century European text (Letts, 1945; Hamilton, 1996b).

³¹ The languages, with the first date in which a version in that tongue appears (if known), are as follows: French (early thirteenth century), Anglo-Norman (early thirteenth century), Occitan (thirteenth century), Welsh (1346), Hebrew (1371), Italian, German, Catalan (fifteenth century), [Middle Scots](#) (fifteenth century), Irish (fifteenth century), Swedish (fifteenth century), Serbian (fifteenth century), Old Church Slavonic (fifteenth century), Danish (early sixteenth century), Dutch (1506), Spanish (1515), Portuguese (1515), and Russian.

Across all versions of the *LOPJ*, the narrative's organization proceeds in the following manner: "the presentation of Prester John, with a salutation and invitation to the recipient; a statement of intentions, concerning a proposed military expedition; geographic, geologic, zoological, botanical, mineralogical, sociological and ethical description of the kingdom . . . a description of the palace and of everyday life at court; and, finally, information outlining the nature of his title" (Ramos, 2006: 31). Within that structure, the interpolations swerve between classical lore (gold-digging giant ants [interpolation D]) and schoolboy silliness (a "Cavern of Dragons . . . whose depth is most deep, and most cavernly and full of secret places" [interpolation E]). Because its fragmentary structure tolerated unusual juxtapositions, the text could readily assimilate new material and thus "functioned almost as a genre of a text rather than as a single piece of writing" (Brewer, 2015: 10). The interpolations mostly offer entertaining anecdotes that fail to provide information that would help a reader locate the kingdom of Prester John. Of these incarnations, only interpolation C includes material that alters *LOPJ*'s underlying thrust, offering a millenarian warning that the world's monstrous races will soon be loosed on Europe (Brewer, 2015: 133–134).

Even within the chaotic collage of classical and medieval lore, the *LOPJ* retained a coherent message grounded in the tensions already established by the three other core texts. While no Catholic, this powerful Eastern king evidences the hierarchical dominance of the Christian religion, which will become clearer when he joins Latin Europe's ideological and military war against Islam. Among the descriptions of giants, dog-headed men, the terrestrial paradise, the ten lost tribes of Israel, and the tomb of St. Thomas, Prester John pledges to visit the Holy Sepulchre with a large army "in order to vanquish the enemies of Christ" (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 68). Although the *LOPJ* underwent revision and expansion over ensuing centuries, Prester John's pledge of aid and the kingdom's association with St. Thomas remain part of all extant copies.

Given the variations between versions, the *LOPJ* might be best understood as a communally authored textual tradition rather than a singular text.³² Its open-source orientation also meant that its textual matter could be readily incorporated into other texts and contexts. Until c. 1190, the *LOPJ* was copied exclusively in Latin. Given its malleability, it is not surprising to see how quickly the *LOPJ* was translated from Latin into vernaculars and from prose to poetry. Although copies of the *LOPJ* continued to circulate hundreds of years after its original appearance – Brewer (2015: 313) notes that nearly 100 of the 232 Latin

³² Manuscript classifications include *Epistola*, *Littera*, *Descriptio*, *Historia*, *Liber*, *Chronica*, *Sermo*, *Tractatus*, *Libellus*, and *Pseudepistola* (Brewer, 2015: 315).

manuscripts were produced in the fifteenth century – European authors began to integrate Prester John into some of literary history’s most canonical medieval and early modern narratives, even as the historical expectations for his arrival endured.

Even within the first fifty years of *LOPJ*’s circulation, the acknowledgment of the legend in contemporaneous narratives suggests that the legend had taken hold of the imagination of readers across Europe. Already in 1181, a reference to the *LOPJ* surfaces in the *Chronica* of Geoffrey of Breuil, wherein the land of Prester John is listed among all the kingdoms that existed at that point. Another late twelfth-century chronicle, *Annales Colonienses Maximi*, identifies a Nestorian patriarch called “Iafelinus” living “in the kingdom of John the Priest” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 274). The late twelfth-century *Continuatio Admontensis* discusses Prester John as “King of Armenia and India” and repeats events found in Otto of Freising’s chronicle (Brewer, 2015: 275). Take finally the example of Gerald of Wales’ brief reference to Prester John in his *De vita Galfridi*, in which he unfavorably describes a man’s pride as being like that of Prester John. The inclusion of Prester John as rhetorical detail implies that Gerald imagined that his reader would be familiar enough with the *LOPJ* to recall the braggadocious tone of its author.

When copies of the *LOPJ* began to identify Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (r. 1155–1190) as its addressee, the emperor’s rival Pope Alexander III (r. 1159–1181) decided in 1177 to pen several copies of a response letter that pleaded for “the illustrious and magnificent King of the Indies” to reconcile himself to the Catholic Church (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 94). In so doing, Alexander became the first of six popes who write directly to Prester John. Traditionally, scholars have cited the pope’s act as an affirmation of sincere belief in the existence of a literal and locatable Prester John. There are, however, indications that this epistolary gesture had a more performative purpose in mind (Hamilton, 1996b).³³ In writing a letter to Prester John at the very climax of a power struggle with Emperor Frederick, Alexander attempts to reinscribe his ecclesiastical power as the rightful custodian of doctrinal Catholicism, a rhetorical act made more plain by his decision to designate an envoy to deliver the letter without an explicit destination. By publicly making himself Prester John’s primary interlocutor, Pope Alexander III demonstrates the inherently rhetorical nature of this epistolary gesture of

³³ Seventeen years earlier (1160), Frederick had chosen to recognize “antipope” Victor IV over Alexander III. As a result, Alexander excommunicated the emperor. In 1177, the same year that Alexander wrote to Prester John, the Peace of Venice ended the power struggle between Alexander and Frederick, ceding authority to Alexander.

writing back to Prester John. Within twenty years of its being written, Alexander's letter begin to infiltrate European [chronicles](#),³⁴ and it became so central to Pope Alexander III's biography that this story is recorded in a text as late as Archibald Bower's 1766 *History of the Popes*. For the ensuing five centuries, popes made a tradition of writing to Prester John, wherever he was, for instruction and to aid in the ongoing project of holy war.³⁵

It did not matter that Prester John failed to materialize or even write back. When by the early thirteenth century the initial political utility of the *LOPJ* began to wane, vernacular copies of the *LOPJ* started to emerge at a rapid pace. Meanwhile, the adaptability of the legend helped successive generations of writers integrate Prester John into political, historical, literary, and prophetic traditions, as versions of what might more accurately be called the letters of Prester John continued to circulate.

Response to Initial Context

Scholars have characterized the origins of the Prester John legend in a variety of ways, much of which also anticipates the Prester John narrative paths outlined in the sections that follow. These characterizations tend to describe Prester John as either serving a practical political function or already inhabiting the realm of fantasy. We have, on the one hand, scholarship that grounds the twelfth-century Prester John in the rhetorically grounded reality of diplomatic exigency: an "allegorical figure of a political utopia" (Olschki, 1960: 391) or "a product of the thought-world of the Crusades" (Hamilton, 1996b: 256). On the other hand, we find scholarship that positions this early era in the more abstract realm of imagination: "a work of imaginative literature" (Silverberg, 1972: 46), "epistolary fantasy" (Heng, 2003: 276), "science fiction" (Helleiner, 1959: 56), "tongue and cheek from beginning to end" (Rachewiltz, 1996: 66), or simply a legend that "was regarded with suspicion" (Brewer, 2015: 8).

The purpose of reviewing the earliest details of the Prester John legend, along with the scholarly responses to them, is not to relitigate the belief systems from which the legend emerged or even to emphasize the variety of academic understandings of these early years of Prester John lore. It is instead to contend that the variation and contradiction within and among the five narrative paths that follow are present from the very beginnings of the legend. More specifically, the grounds for understanding Prester John as historical/real (paths one,

³⁴ See, for instance, Roger Howden's *Gesta Regis Henrici II et Ricardi I* along with the anonymous *Flores Historiarum*.

³⁵ The rhetorical journey of Alexander's letter inspired later physical journeys: a half dozen papal emissaries and the twenty-first-century journey of one intrepid British travel writer (Jubber, 2005).

two, three, six) or rhetorical/imaginative (paths one, four, five, six) reflect not only the lack of clear medieval distinctions between these narrative modes but also a malleability discernible within the legend's murky origins. This early tolerance of variation helps make possible not only the legend's durability but also what we might call the "negative capability" that allowed for contradictory narrative paths to perpetuate themselves simultaneously.

Prester John as Crusader (Path One)

From its earliest stages, the legend of Prester John made use of the rhetoric of crusading. The distant priest-king ally became a convenient rhetorical tool to triangulate the discourse of crusading with biblical history and the long-standing expectation of the existence of Christians beyond Europe's borders. The tale of a Christian army poised to help Europe enclose Islam from the East provided a tactical comfort that eventually developed into the first distinct narrative path taken by the legend. Here, Prester John enters the realm of prophecy. But as with all such paths, the transformation of Prester John from epistolary braggart into ally-crusader eventually "snapped back" to the legend's foundational concerns.

Both Otto of Freising's anecdote and the *LOPJ* make explicit reference to such a figure's attempt to lend military support to the Holy Land. The story had already taken hold of European readers, as attested by Richard of Poitiers's later twelfth-century *Chronica Richardi Pictaviensis*, which copied verbatim Otto's account of this priest-king's provenance. Yet nothing in Otto's account suggests that this figure was that answer to crusader crises; the text explicitly states that John and his army had been forced to turn back before reaching Jerusalem. As the Third (1189–1192) and Fourth Crusades (1202–1204) were waged, this priest-king failed to materialize, even as copies of the *LOPJ* continued to proliferate into the vernacular. The *LOPJ* had presented Europe with a model of Christian governance able to exercise its sovereignty over internal threats (monsters, heretics) and committed to an armed defense of the faith. These very features became the core concerns of the Catholic Church in the first quarter of the thirteenth century. In 1211, Pope Innocent III reached out to the Georgian ruler King George IV to ask for the protection of the remaining Crusader States (Hamilton, 1996b: 242). Four years later, Innocent presided over the Fourth Lateran Council, which in addition to forcing Jews and Muslims to identify themselves by their dress, reaffirmed all previous denunciations of heresies and reduced the historical plurality *heresies* into the conceptual singularity, *heresy*. In the seventy-first and final canon, a **Fifth Crusade** was called.

One of the selected leaders of this new military venture, Bishop of Acre and future Cardinal **Jacques de Vitry**, hoped from the beginning to fold other

Christian principalities into this new war. Writing to friends in Paris in 1217, Jacques *avers* that “the Christians living amongst the Saracens are greater in number than the Saracens [themselves]” and suggests that “many Christian kings living in the Eastern regions up to the land of Prester John, hearing of the arrival of the crusaders [*crucesignatorum*], would come to their help and go to war with the Saracens” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 99). Although Prester John himself is not involved in this proposal, the accepted presence of his land somewhere in “India” provided Jacques with a geographical and rhetorical touchstone to suggest the proliferation of Christian communities outside of Europe’s borders. If only the crusaders could gather 4,000 men, Jacques insisted, they would certainly defeat the fractured Islamic forces. In 1218, crusading leaders agreed to attack Egypt. The Christian army took Damietta late in 1219, but not before the pope’s legate Cardinal Pelagius is shown an Arabic prophecy by “Hannan, Son of Agip,” which augured the arrival of a certain “King of the Abissi” who will come conquer Mecca and “scatter the bones of Mahomet” (qtd. in Hamilton, 1996b: 243–244). Pelagius sees himself as the tall man with a lean face whom the prophecy foretells would invade Egypt and capture Damietta.

Two years later, lacking clear direction after the departure of important figures such as the Hungarian King Andrew, crusading leaders found a new direction when Bohemond IV of Antioch relayed to Jacques the *Relatio de Davide*. This text recast the deeds of Genghis Khan onto an Eastern Christian ruler called King David, whom Jacques was later able to connect to his earlier stories about Prester John. Jacques summarized the tract in his so-called *Letter VII*, a text that helps distinguish this first of the legend’s narrative paths (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 131):

But this King David, a most powerful man and a knight strenuous in arms, fiery in nature, and most victorious in battle, whom the Lord roused in our times to be the hammer of pagans and the exterminator of the pestilential tradition and detestable law of the faithless Muhammad; he is the man whom the common people call Prester John . . . as will be known from the copy of the following tract which we managed, as well as we were able, to translate from Arabic into Latin through trustworthy translators.

A Latin translation of a text allegedly authored by an Arabic-speaking Christian in Baghdad, the *Relatio de Davide* transposes the deeds of Mongols onto a Nestorian Christian rooted in biblical genealogy. Notably, this text, which circulated in three different versions, is unaccounted for prior to (or outside of) Jacques’ letters and does not initially tie King David to Prester John. According to all three versions, this David, after systematically conquering cities of the

Asian Steppe, vowed only in the *Relatio*'s third and final translation "to fight against Muslim rulers on behalf of the Latin Christians, to go to Jerusalem as a pilgrim, and to rebuild the Holy City" (qtd. in Richard, 1996: 146). Curiously, this King David had vanquished the same lands as had Otto of Freising's Nestorian priest-king. In this third version of the *Relatio*, the translator directly links King David to Prester John for the first time, affirming that the former was the son or grandson of the latter (Brewer, 2015: 131). This was important news that Jacques had unearthed, and auspicious given the uncertainty surrounding the direction of the crusade.

This is not to say that the battles of the Fifth Crusade were guided by the tip of Jacques' pen; instead, it is to point out the deliberate rhetorical maneuvers that Jacques, Cardinal Pelagius, and chronicler Oliver of Paderborn (among others) employed to tie strategic military decisions to the authority of prophecy by deliberately invoking the foundational themes of the Prester John legend. The *Relatio* was sent to various powerful European leaders by both Jacques and, later, the Portuguese Pelagius, who became the de facto leader of the Fifth Crusade in Damietta. Although it was successful in drumming up support for the Fifth Crusade from European leaders outside of Damietta, morale slumped among the Christians on the frontlines. Jacques writes that "a long time" after sharing this prophecy with the crusading army in Damietta, "we have not heard any notable letters or pleasant rumours either from David, the Eastern king, or from the emperor Frederick, as we had previously heard" (Brewer, 2015: 134). The *Relatio* was, after all, a text grounded only in past deeds.

Luckily, Jacques had also discovered yet another text, this one returning to another foundational theme of the legend's initial era: the pledge of aid. In the same *Letter VII*, Jacques shares the aforementioned prophecy of "Hannan son of Agip," translated from Arabic, which contained, he claimed, original prophecies of the Apostle Peter. Later in the decade, chronicler *Oliver of Paderborn* (1170–1227) identifies the prophecies as coming from a now-lost book of universal history called *The Book of Clement*, dubiously attributed to Clement of Rome (c. 150–215). In revealing the history of the world from Creation to Apocalypse, "Clement" predicts future events in the form of prophecy. Jacques emphasizes one prediction in his letter: the meeting of a king from the East and one from the West in Damietta who will together "exterminate the detestable law of faithless Muhammad" (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 131).

Folding Prester John into the apocalyptic tradition of postponed destiny, *The Book of Clement* predicts that this confluence of kings would occur in the year 1222. After a six-month delay, the crusaders at Damietta, led by Pelagius, decide to invade Cairo in 1221, rejecting an agreement with the Sultan Al-Kamil that would have returned Jerusalem to the crusaders in exchange for

Damietta. Marching south during monsoon season, the Nile River rises and floods, cutting off the Christians' path and turning the invasion of Cairo into defeat. Neither Prester John nor the prophesied Western king, presumed to be Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, ever arrived, yet Prester John's impact on the military decisions of the Fifth Crusade can hardly be overestimated, even if scholars have begun to caution against forging direct causal links between military decisions and the legend of Prester John (Musarra, 2023).³⁶

After the disastrous end of the Fifth Crusade, it seems that no medieval writer would dare revive the idea of Prester John as a willing and proximate ally in the ongoing project of crusading. And yet, even as hopes for Prester John's arrival appeared to be extinguished, the legend itself continued to grow. Of the 469 extant copies of *LOPJ*, the majority were copied after the Fifth Crusade (Brewer, 2015: 313). Somehow, after a hiatus of nearly 200 years, Prester John crusading narratives reappeared. In 1407, Konrad von Jungingen, Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights, wrote his own letter to Prester John to seek aid for the reconquest of the Holy Land. Later that century, the Grand Master of the Hospitallers Jean de Lastic wrote a letter (1448) to King Charles VII of France (r. 1422–1461) to inform the king of Prester John (here the Ethiopian *negus*) about his recent military defeats of Islamic armies, which would continue, Jean writes, into Egypt, Arabia, and Syria. Not only are these fifteenth-century crusading pleas testament to the endurance of the legend but they also speak to the cyclical rhythm of the narrative paths themselves, which have no discrete endpoints. This first narrative path represents the legend's first significant transformation (from distant marvel to imminent savior), showcases the elastic return to the legend's foundational concerns (need for assistance, pledge of aid), anticipates future points of connection between paths (specifically the Nile River), and maintains the legend's ability to hold in abeyance the unreality of Prester John's existence (regardless of prophecy and his failure to materialize).

From this point, however, Europeans realized that they must themselves seek Prester John. By 1211, the Naiman Turks, led by Kuchlug, the man John of Plano Carpini called Prester John, had defeated the Qara Khitai. Seven years later, Kuchlug was beheaded by the armies of Genghis Khan, the man whom Jacques de Vitry, Cardinal Pelagius, and anxious European leaders had so hopefully fleshed out, via the *Relatio de Davide*, into the son or grandson of

³⁶ The tale shifted in the aftermath of this disaster. Oliver of Paderborn recasts the prophecy as that of "a certain king of the Nubian Christians," who "would destroy the city of Mecca and scatter the bones of Muhammad," but in Jerusalem, rather than Damietta (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 137). By 1225, according to the anonymous *Chronicon Sancti Martini Turonensis*, Jacques de Vitry had publicly claimed prior to the campaign to Cairo that King David was "devouring the impious Saracens like beasts" (Brewer, 2015: 276). A decade later, Albéric of Trois-Fontaine's *Chronica*, shifts the meeting point to Cairo, the target toward which the crusaders marched to their defeat.

Prester John. Owing to the failures of the Fifth Crusade, it seems like a fitting end to these stories of a prophesied, bellicose, Christian King David. And in a way it was. Stories of the augured arrival of Prester John or some proxy of his progeny faded as papal envoys were sent to seek Prester John among the Mongols. So too faded the equivalence between King David and Genghis Khan. Nonetheless, the name and narrative frame of King David, descendant of Prester John, remained a preferred point of identification well into the texts of narrative path two, establishing an important continuation in two otherwise divergent narrative paths.

Prester John as Mongol (Path Two)

Given the recent failures of the Fifth Crusade and the unmistakable accomplishments of Genghis Khan, whose armies had conquered much of Central and East Asia en route to establishing the largest contiguous empire in history, it is no surprise that those still waiting for Prester John integrated the priest-king into the story of Mongol conquest. By 1241, groups of Mongol warriors had traveled across the Asian Steppe and entered Poland, Hungary, and the Danube Valley. In 1245 and 1253, papal bulls inaugurated Dominican and then Franciscan missionary ventures to bring the people of the “three Indias,” including the Mongols, to the Catholic faith. By the 1250s, eastbound travelers began to return to the Latin West with even more firsthand intelligence about the Mongol leaders whom crusading advocates of the previous century had fleshed out into the messianic figure of *King David*. Over the next fifty years, Prester John came to be associated with some half dozen Mongol personages, none of which were imagined as useful to Europe, militarily or ecclesiastically.

Most significant of the features new to this narrative path was that Prester John was dead. Some writers even stripped the figure of any association with Christianity. In these narratives, the hope for his arrival is significantly diminished; rather than a warrior-savior, Prester John became a point of orientation to help Europeans understand this new community of nomadic people who now posed an acute military threat. Accounts of Prester John’s defeat and death helped establish a framework by which Europeans would understand the extent of Mongolian might. That his downfall was often cast as a failure of faith also helped refocus these missionary embassies on the project of conversion. The earliest accounts of a Mongol Prester John come directly from the missionary and diplomatic journeys to Mongol courts in Armenia and Mongolia and from the observations, experiences, and gossip gained within those communities. Nearly all surviving accounts from this era of diplomacy include at least a small comment about Prester John.

In some ways these accounts retain the language of earlier paths, through continual use of “King David,” a concern with military prowess, and/or some “heretical” affiliation. An early example of this occurs in Italian notary Richard of San Germano’s *Chronica* (c. 1243), which neatly combines the legend’s initial context with its first two narrative paths. Writing in the service of Frederick II, Richard recorded how Hungarian King Andrew II sent word to Pope Honorius III (r. 1216–1227) regarding the exploits of King David (Genghis Khan), whom, he adds, had been carrying the body of St. Thomas for seven years as he and his army conquered lands into Russia. The strategic support that a “King David” army might provide Europe still lingered into this new era; Pope Innocent IV (r. 1243–1254) called for yet another crusade in 1245, the same year he authorized the first Dominican mission to the court of the Mongol commander Baiju, the imperial governor of the Mongol Near East.

The notion of a still-powerful Prester John lingered into the account of at least one more writer in this path. For John of Plano Carpini, the first in a wave of Dominican envoys sent by Innocent IV to convert leaders and citizens of the Mongolian Empire, soliciting intelligence on Prester John was not a priority. Nonetheless, his *Ystoria Mongalorum* (1247–1250) includes a brief passage that frames Prester John as the rare leader able to defend himself against the fearsome Genghis Khan. John borrows from the *Alexander legends* – a key influence for the *LOPJ* (Bar-Ilan, 1995: 294) – to describe Prester John, king of India “maior,” as an ingenious strategist who replaced his men with fire-filled “copper images” on horseback and successfully “repelled [the army of Genghis] from their borders, nor have we ever heard that they returned to [Prester John] again” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 153). This story, an embellished fantasy of Kuchlug’s victory over Genghis Khan (which did not, of course, ever happen), completes a cycle in which the three foremost figures in a century’s worth of history on the Qara Khitai were imagined, separately, as Prester John: Yeh-lü Ta-shih (Hugh of Jabala’s *Presbyter Johannes*), Kuchlug Khan (John of Plano Carpini’s Prester John), and Genghis Khan (Jacques de Vitry’s King David; later, in 1309, Raymond Lull’s Prester John). The desperate attempt to attach the lore of Prester John onto the deeds of Eastern warriors threatening westward was perhaps not lost on its Latin audience. That this was the only text of its era to proclaim Prester John as victorious over a Mongol army coincides perhaps with the fact that John of Plano Carpini’s narrative was largely doubted upon his return (Brewer, 2015: 152); in fact, the story above comes from a revised version of John’s text.

It was much more common for eastward travelers of this era to position Prester John on the other side of Mongolian might. In another *Dominican* embassy sent by Innocent IV, Ascelin of Lombardia and his companion-chronicler *Simon of*

St. Quentin did not receive the hospitable treatment afforded to their predecessor John. Simon's account of Prester John in the *Historia Tartarum* (c. 1248), now lost but partially preserved in Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale* (1256–1269) accorded with his larger interests in slandering the history, customs, and morality of the Mongols. In response to a coup organized by Genghis Khan, the Tartars (Mongols), Simon writes, “conspired against their lord King David,” a reference to the Kerait Toghrih Khan (d. 1203) but here reframed as the “son of once lord and emperor of India, Prester John” (Brewer, 2015: 157). Genghis (then Temujin) had been mentored by Toghrih/King David as a young man but in this moment “killed him” (p. 157).

This story of King David's death at the hands of the man whom the leaders of the Fifth Crusade had called King David neatly illustrates just how convoluted and malleable the legend of Prester John could be. The tale of Genghis Khan's murder of Prester John became one of the longest-lasting stories of the legend, despite Prester John bearing several different names or titles across the texts that mentioned this story: Toghrih, *Unc Khan*, Ong Khan, Wang Khan (Sheir, 2022: 280–287). Descriptions of his death at the hands of Genghis Khan occur without much variation in an astonishing range of travel narratives and chronicles from the mid thirteenth into the eighteenth centuries.³⁷ Such spurious recasting of Prester John attests to the fluid historical logic that governed the transmission of Prester John from narrative path to narrative path: It was as if the legendary personage could migrate to some proximal surrogate when historically accurate information about the happenings of the wider world trickled into Europe and rendered a prior association untenable.

Other narratives maintain the frame story but embellish Prester John's deviation from Christianity for rhetorical effect. For Dominican André de Longjumeau, whose account of his travels to Güyük Khan (1245–1251) informs Jean de Joinville's account in his *Life of Saint Louis* (1309), the defeat of Prester John, described by Jean as an “infidel king,” helps explain how the Mongols had come to hold so much power (Brewer, 2015: 193). Joinville insisted on the sinful, utter non-Christianity of Prester John, perhaps echoing the European missionaries' difficulties in converting the people they encountered. Gregory Bar-Hebraeus helps show that this rumor about Prester John was not solely confined to the discussions between Latin Europeans and their Mongol hosts. In his *Syriac Chronicle* (before

³⁷ Cf. John of Columpna's *Mari Historiarum* (1250–1340), Venetian geographer Marino Sanudo Toresello's *Liber Fidelium Crucis* (c. 1307), Henry of Herford's *Liber de Rebus Memorabilibus* (1355), *Eulogium Historiarum* (c. 1362), Jacques de Guises' *Annales Hanoniae* (late 14th c.), Dominique Bouhours' *The Life of St. Ignatius* (1686), Ephraim Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* (1728), Johann Lorenz von Mosheim's *Historia Tartarorum Ecclesiastica* (1741), Voltaire's *Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of Nations* (1756), and Patrick Nisbet's *An Abridgment of Ecclesiastical History* (1776).

1286), he relates that the ruler of the Keraites known as “[Unach Khan](#), who is the same as the Christian King John,” was overthrown by Genghis Khan, adding that this defeat was the result of “God [taking] [King John’s] power away from him” as punishment for marrying a Chinese woman and worshipping “foreign gods” (Brewer, 2015: 170). These accounts help show the more dangerous side of Prester John’s global heterotopic Christianity: the possibility of falling prey to the exotic forces he was entrusted to domesticate and familiarize.

With the arrival of Franciscans to China, there emerged a slightly different if somehow *more* pessimistic account of the defeated Prester John. The genesis of this alternative Prester John death narrative derives from the *Itinerarium* (1253–1255) of Franciscan [William of Rubruck](#), who visited the leaders of three Mongol camps, from the Volga River to Karakorum, after false rumors reached Europe that the Mongol prince Sartaq had converted to Christianity. William was charged to investigate rumors of so-called Nestorian Christians among the Mongol cities and to convert any he found to Catholicism. William’s account maintains a reputation as the most ethnographically perspicacious and clear-eyed of its era, so its sobering commentary on the most infamous Eastern Christian should not come as a surprise. Here William not only reduces Prester John to a Nestorian chieftain shepherd of the Naiman Turks but also insists that John “died without an heir” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 163). According to William, rule therefore passed to his brother Unc Khan, a man cursed due to his lapsed Christian faith. William offered a slightly altered version of the man the Dominican missionaries had identified as Prester John, whose death is then described at the hands of Genghis Khan. Insistent that his sources for this story were the Nestorian Christians he met on his travels, William undercuts the authority of his tale, noting that such heretics were not to be trusted: “they used to say ten times more about [Prester John] than was the truth” (Brewer, 2015: 163). For William, who consciously sought the support of a converted Mongol people, Prester John was just another Eastern heretic.

After William returned to Europe and presented King Louis with his narrative, several texts emerged to build on the Franciscan’s skepticism and counter a century’s worth of Prester John optimism. Roger Bacon, influenced by William’s account, writes in his *Opus Majus* (1267) of “Black Cathay” and of the “many false things that have been written and said” about Prester John there (Brewer, 2015: 21). Generations after William’s journey, fellow Franciscan missionary Odoric of Pordenone (1330), the last Catholic missionary of this era to place Prester John in Asia (some fifty days’ journey to the west of Cathay), amplifies his predecessor’s skepticism: “not one hundredth part is true of what is told of him as if it were undeniable” (Brewer, 2015: 196). By the eighteenth century, François Pétis de la Croix’s biography of Genghis Khan,

Histoire de Genghizcan (1710), proffers that the stories of Prester John were the product of a Nestorian hoax (Brewer, 2015: 259–260).

Given the 1291 fall of Acre, the last major crusader outpost in the Levant, and the 1295 official adoption of Islam by Ghazan Khan (r. 1295–1304), it seemed no longer possible to establish a Mongol–Christian alliance, never mind an alliance with Prester John. Even within the fourteenth century, Prester John became a mere footnote in *chronicles* touching on Mongol history. This can be seen in the *Flores temporum imperatores* (late thirteenth century) and in Guillaume de Nangis’ *Gesta Ludovici IX* (c. 1301). Such skepticism traveled as far away as Norway, where a chronicler writes that the *LOPJ* “has been widely circulated, but it has always been mistrusted and charged with falsehood” (Barnes, 2012: 222–223). After a few hundred years, stories of Prester John as a minor Asian ruler returned to circulation, as writers began to rebrand the medieval universal chronicle into the Enlightenment era essay or encyclopedia.³⁸ Meanwhile, other narratives written after the era of Mongol exploration continued to identify Prester John with some sort of Asian monarch and utilized this historical fact to bolster theological or political arguments. For example, John Bale’s *Image of Both Churches* (before 1552) positions Prester John’s Christian heterodoxy and subsequent rhetorical persecution by concerned Catholic officials as a kind of proto-Protestant act. The anonymous fifteenth-century *Universi Terrigenae* adopts the voice and vantage of Prester John to comment on contemporary English politics. Nonetheless, despite the proliferation of texts testifying to the demise of Prester John, two fourteenth-century narratives of this path helped rescue Prester John from the dustbin of history.

The first of these, Marco Polo’s *Livres des merveilles du monde* (or *Il Milione*) (c. 1300) preserves the Prester John legend despite Marco’s affirmation that Prester John was dead. This narrative created a new audience for the Prester John legend as it gained distinction as an authoritative account of the East. The text itself stands out less in the substance of Marco’s observations than in the style with which his cowriter Rustichello of Pisa presents it. Rustichello, often credited as the first Italian writer to pen an Arthurian romance, included several literary flourishes to color the bald “historical” facts. For one, rather than rely solely on third-person narration, the narrative offers monologues from its chief characters, including Prester John. In addition, the familiar stories are told with increased emotional attention: “And when Chingis Khan heard the great dishonour that

³⁸ Four such endeavors – Domonique Bouhours’ *The Life of St. Ignatius* (1686), Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* (1728), Johann Lorenz von Mosheim’s *Historia Tartarorum Ecclesiastica* (1741), and Patrick Nisbet’s *An Abridgment of Ecclesiastical History* (1776) – identify Prester John with Unc Khan and detail the death of Prester John’s son, King David, at the hands of Genghis Khan.

Prester John had done him, his heart was so enflamed that it almost burst from within his breast” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 179). Even though Polo’s narrative makes clear that the historical Prester John has died, his name lives on.

Polo’s *Travels* amplifies two other minor details into key thematic ideas that would come to influence later narratives. The first is Prester John’s refusal to marry one of Genghis’ daughters (later seen in Odoric’s 1330 narrative) along with the subsequent establishment of an intermarriage tradition between the two families that ensued after the original Prester John’s death. This narrative frame seems to derive from an inverted scenario described in Simon of St. Quentin’s account, in which King David’s entire family was “cut to pieces limb by limb” except one daughter, whom Genghis Khan married and with whom he produced sons (Brewer, 2015: 158). Polo’s version is more aligned with that of William of Rubruck’s *Itinerarium*, in which William reports that since the former people of Prester John – here called “Iugures” (Uighurs) – were the first to submit to Genghis Khan’s authority, the Khan gave his daughter to the new king of the territory. The transformation of the Uighur tradition into an opportunity to assimilate Prester John, by way of a title, into the Genghiskhanid dynasty supplies Prester John with another genealogy to inhabit and thus breathes life into a flailing tradition.

The second detail in the *Travels* worth mentioning is the establishment of Prester John as an inheritable title and Marco’s identification of Ongüt Korgiz (King George) as holder of the title. Although the association between the Ongüt people and Genghis Khan was historically accurate, Marco’s decision to position this Christian people as the people of Prester John rekindled some of the missionary desires that had been all but extinguished by the turn of the fourteenth century, which led to further exploration (Morgan, 1996: 166). In a 1305 letter written to Pope Clement V, John of Monte Corvino, who would become the most successful of the Catholic evangelists in the Mongolian Empire, insists on the convertibility of the Nestorian Christians, boasting of his ability to convert a Nestorian “from the progeny of that great king that was called Prester John” named King George (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 189). By the time John of Monte Corvino was done with this Nestorian, King George had received minor orders and faithfully celebrated the Catholic Mass.

Polo’s account attracted readers in a way that the previous ethnographic and missionary accounts were not intended to do. Moreover, the popularity of the text (which survives in some 135 manuscripts and numerous printed editions) helped ensure the survival of Prester John as a character.

This Prester John as Mongol narrative path then reaches a forking point with a traveler who failed to reach his destination. Dominican friar Jordanus of Sévérac had planned to travel to the Catholic archdiocese set up by John of Monte Corvino in China but made it only as far as India before bending his

journey toward Africa. In his *Mirabilia* (c. 1330), Jordanus transposes Prester John from a land in which he had become a historical relic to an area of the world that would come to attract European attention for the next two centuries. Blending the marvel of the *LOPJ* with the neutral style of his fellow missionaries, Jordanus describes a “Third India,” which generally signified the Horn of Africa, to which he had himself not actually traveled. According to Jordanus, Prester John’s kingdom lay on the other side of a quest. After locating a dragon, the reader is instructed by Jordanus to “wait for seventy days . . . and take the carbuncle which is rooted in the top of its head, and carry it to the emperor of the Ethiopians, whom you call Prester John” (qtd. in Slessarev, 1959: 163). Prester John was dead in “Greater India” but would remain alive in this “Third India.”

Prester John as African Monarch (Path Three)

The thirteenth-century Catholic diplomatic and missionary ventures made clear that a living Prester John would not be found in China or in any part of the Mongol Empire. By several interconnected motives, Prester John was transposed to Africa, beginning in the fourteenth century.³⁹ In the early fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, European merchants, explorers, and missionaries set out on proto-colonial excursions to find Prester John on the coasts and in the interior of Africa, seeking military partnership, mercantile leverage, and communities of Christians. These journeys were made possible rhetorically, politically, and financially due to the travelers’ ability to tie their journey to a name and narrative framework already familiar within the tongues of several European languages. Unlike the narratives of the Mongol path, Prester John was here found alive, which altered the objectives of those who sought him. In many of these early expeditions to Africa and for many of those who wrote about Prester John as African, four goals stood out (two familiar, two new): to identify an ally against the Muslim Mamluks in Egypt, to convert the king to Catholicism, to acquire leverage in the global spice trade, and to gain control (or at least influence) over the flow of the Nile River. Within this narrative frame, Prester John sat poised between worlds. For some, Prester John represented a possible point of entry into a new global economy; for others, he remained a metonymic tie to an “Old World” of imaginative, ideologically coded geography.

³⁹ While Friar Jordanus’ text is commonly discussed as the first to locate Prester John in Africa, Cerulli does document a slightly earlier placement of Prester John in relation to Africa by two Irish minorite friars who, in 1323, narrate that Prester John can be found by sailing up the “endless” Nile into Upper India (*Predictus autem fluvius Nilus est ille ingens et famosus, cuius longitudinis non est finis; per quem ascenditur navigio a Mare Mediterraneo ad Indiam superiorem, in qua stat Presbyter Johannes*). While the mention of the Nile seems to situate Prester John in Africa, the description of *Indiam superiorem* would have been likely understood as the southern and coastal Indian subcontinent.

This transposition from minor Mongol or Nestorian chieftain to Ethiopian *negus* (king) may appear unlikely to the modern reader, but there was solid historical and cultural footing to help ground such a relocation. That is not to say that all Prester John texts from the fourteenth century placed Prester John in Africa; this century also contained texts from the Crusader,⁴⁰ Mongol,⁴¹ literary,⁴² and hybrid narrative paths.⁴³ The fourteenth century saw the Prester John legend in a state of transition. First, there was no longer a cogent reason to seek Prester John in either “Greater” or “Lesser” India, however imprecise and malleable these terms were. As stated in the *LOPJ*, the priest-king rules over “Three Indias,” and by the fourteenth century, there was only one “India” left to search: the so-called Middle India. After the Fifth Crusade, “Middle India” had become firmly identifiable with the Horn of Africa. Writers had already come to subdivide the inhabitants of this Middle India into three peoples, drawing on Isidore of Seville (Barney et al., 2006: IX.ii.127), one being Indians, which helps illustrate the larger conflation of “India” with the Horn of Africa in this era.

By “Indians,” what was likely meant here was Eastern – that is to say “Nestorian” – Christians. These associations were fluid, however, and the loose associative logic that governed such terms – “East,” “Asia,” “India,” “Nestorian,” among other geographical-ideological signifiers – gave Prester John ample room to roam about on both physical and ideological planes. By the fourteenth century, Ethiopia and Abyssinia referred to any inhabitants of trans-Saharan Africa, but even then, the geography, culture, or political structure of Ethiopia (or Abyssinia) was not well understood in Latin Europe. For example, the unfulfilled prophecy that so inspired Cardinal Pelagius and had promised a “King of the Abissi” to “scatter the bones of Mahomet” was not at the time interpreted as a reference to the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia (Hamilton, 1996b: 243). Even as late as the sixteenth century, the Franco-Italian historian *Joseph Scaliger* (1540–1609), after acknowledging his awareness of the history of Ethiopian Christians in Italy, claims in his *De emendatione temporum* (1583) that the Ethiopian people were merely Mongols expelled to that land by Genghis Khan.

Nonetheless, crusaders’ time in Egypt during the Fifth Crusade had exposed them to the strength of Coptic Christianity and had made them aware of other forms of African Christianity. The perceived need in Catholic Europe for

⁴⁰ *Liber Bellorum Domini* (before 1342?).

⁴¹ Henry of Herford, *Liber de rebus memorabilibus* (1355); *Eulogium Historiarum* (1362 or before).

⁴² Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1351); John of Hildesheim’s, *Three Kings of Cologne* (before 1375).

⁴³ *Der Niederrheinischer Orientbericht* (c. 1350–1360); *The Book of John Mandeville* (c. 1360s); Johannes Witte de Hese, *Itinerarium* (c. 1389–1424).

a non-European Christian ally remained acute. The last crusader outposts in Syria fell to the Mamluks in 1291, and many Mongol-conquered lands had come to embrace Islam. Pope Nicholas IV responded by renewing the call for a crusade along with overseeing the diplomatic missions to an “East” that sent John of Monte Corvino to China. In one more effort to seek Christian allies, he wrote to the Ethiopian emperor Prester John in 1289 to seek that king’s conversion to Catholicism as well as an alliance against the Mamluks (Knobler, 1996: 187; Salvatore, 2011: 599; Kurt, 2013: 5). Soon after, Marco Polo would write of Ethiopia (“Abasce”) as a potential ally, noting that “the greatest king of all this province is Christian and the other kings of the province are subject to him” and that the country is “very rich and greatly abounding in all the things of life” (Moule and Pelliot, 1938: 434, 436). Meanwhile, a tradition within Jewish travel writing, beginning with the ninth-century *Sefer Eldad*, had established associations with a land “beyond the rivers of Cush” and the location of the Ten Lost Tribes, a key feature of Prester John’s kingdom as reported in the *LOPJ* (Jacobs, 2014: 44). In other words, northeast Africa in general, and Ethiopia in particular, had acquired both a fabled and logical association with the legend of Prester John and the material abundance his kingdom signified.

There was the biblical precedent to consider as well. The New Testament story (Acts 8:26–40) of Philip the Evangelist’s baptism of an Ethiopian eunuch outside of Jerusalem helped establish a vague awareness of this land and people (Krebs, 2020: 90). In the Christian encyclopedic tradition of writers such as Isidore of Seville, the Ethiopian people were understood as the descendants of Cush, son of Ham (Barney et al., 2006: X.ii.10). Ethiopia had then in the fourteenth century gained the reputation as a land of Christians descended from the *Solomonic line*, and Solomon was of course the son of a powerful King David, another one of Prester John’s aliases. This third India was also reputed to house the mysterious headwaters of one of the four biblical rivers mentioned in Genesis 2:13. The Gihon River that encompassed the whole of Ethiopia, as described in Genesis, had come to be popularly understood as the Nile River, the very same waterway that ran through Damietta and whose flooding on the march to Cairo led directly to the crusaders’ surrender. Genoese and Venetian merchants, who by this time had established permanent warehouses in Alexandria, had some exposure to the Nile River, which was so central to this era’s understanding of both Ethiopia and Prester John.

Put simply “[t]he history of the legend of Prester John is interconnected with the history of . . . Europe’s fascination with Africa” (Campbell, 2016: 163). We might also say that the history of Europe’s fascination with Africa was also strongly tied to the history of the legend of Prester John. Such speculation, which concerned the cartographic, military, religious, ideological, and

cosmological significance of the land below Egypt, unknown to Europe's classical authorities, centered above all on Ethiopia, which trans-discursively signified a "sociological space" beyond Dar al-Islam (Relaño, 2002: 58).

Foundations of Euro-Ethiopian Exchange

Prester John first appears in Ethiopia (or, specifically, in "Abassia") on the now-lost map (c. 1320s) of the Genoese priest Giovanni da Carignano (c. 1250–1329),⁴⁴ which situates Prester John's kingdom between the White and Blue Nile (Salvadore, 2016: 1–3). Carignano's map is distinguished for its astonishing accuracy and its notable lack of classical and earlier medieval geographical miscognitions. His was the first map to depict Scandinavia as a peninsula, for example, as well as the first to plot a "Terra Abaise" in the Nile Valley populated by "Christiani Nigri."⁴⁵ Like Jordanus' *Mirabilia*, Giovanni's map exists outside of (or prior to) a larger narrative tradition; unlike Jordanus, this historical aberration appears to have been rooted in observed reality, albeit secondhand. Giovanni's church, San Marco al Molo, was strategically situated in the old port of Genoa, which, along with Venice, functioned as Latin Christendom's premier nexus of trade, including that of slaves, and a central node in an emergently global information economy. Giovanni's access to world-wise seafarers certainly sharpened his cartographic mind, but the contents of the long-lost commentary raise the map to the stuff of legend.

According to Jacopo Filippo Foresti (1434–1520), writing more than 150 years after the map's creation in his *Supplementum chronicarum* (1483), the once-attached commentary to Carignano's map attests to a 1306 embassy of Ethiopian Christians who, after a brief tour of Europe, visited Genoa after and spoke with Giovanni. The *Supplementum* relates the story of a powerful patriarch called Prester John who had sent a coterie north of the Muslim world (i.e. north of Mamluk Egypt) to Spain, Rome, and Avignon to seek a military alliance with a man ambiguously referred to as "king of Spains," a distant Christian ruler who might aid Ethiopia against "infidels," likely referring to the incursions of the Ifat Sultanate. Prester John scholars, with a notable exception (Krebs, 2019), have generally accepted the veracity of this alleged visit, in one form or another, despite a lack of contemporaneous corroboration outside of a single manuscript recently studied by Bausi and Chiesa (2019).⁴⁶ Whether or

⁴⁴ The map was already badly damaged before it was destroyed in the 1943 bombing of Naples.

⁴⁵ As a comparison, Venetian Fra Paolino's world map (c. 1323) placed Prester John's Ethiopia in Asia.

⁴⁶ Their article discusses Galvaneus de la Flamma's *Ystoria Etyopie* in the single surviving manuscript of his mid fourteenth-century *Cronica universalis*. Although the discovery of Galvaneus' account of the Ethiopian embassy's arrival in Genoa provides a valuable,

not the 1306 embassy actually arrived, the placement of Prester John's realm on Carignano's map remains a historical fact. Moreover, the narrative Foresti recorded in posterity speaks to the nimble narrative framework of the Prester John legend, here seen inverted, with the Ethiopian Christians seeking a titled warrior within a vaguely understood Christian kingdom beyond Dar al-Islam.

By the middle of the fourteenth century, patterns began to emerge that suggested increased familiarity, if not direct contact, between Ethiopia and Italy. Most of this discourse centered on an Ethiopian Prester John. Fellow Genoan cartographer [Angelino Dulcert](#), a founder of the so-called Mallorcan School of mapmaking, places Prester John in the Horn of Africa – on the upper Nile, next to “Abdeselib” – on his [1339 map](#).⁴⁷ For Dulcert, the *negus* of Ethiopia “Senap” and the “black Christian” Prester John are two different people, a likely testament to the tradition, established by encyclopedic authorities like Isidore of Seville (Barney et al., 2006: XIV.v.16), of an eastern and a western Ethiopia. [John de' Marignolli](#), who traveled to China from 1342 to 1347 after the death of John of Monte Corvino, follows his fourteenth-century predecessors in assigning Prester John to Africa without having visited the continent himself. Quickly shifting his highly digressive *Chronica Boemorum* into an expanded travel narrative, the Franciscan places Prester John in an Ethiopia encircled by the biblical [Gyon](#) River, which the author reports is also called the Nile (Kurt, 2013: 6). Here too, Prester John holds the power to shut off Egypt from the Nile's water, a narrative trope, expanded on below in “Prester John and the Nile,” that can be understood as foundational for texts of this narrative path.

The *Liber peregrinationis*, an account of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem written only five years after Friar Jordanus' *Mirabilia*, represents the earliest written text of this Ethiopian narrative path in which Prester John is discussed as possessing specific military leverage over Islam. As the king of Nubia, Ethiopia, and Egypt, Prester John here has full control over the waters of the Nile; this king of “black Ethiopians” is “more powerful than the sultan,” Jacob learns in the Holy Land (qtd. in Salvatore, 2016: 5). The anonymous Castilian travelogue *The Book of Knowledge*, a more fanciful text discussed later as part of the hybrid narrative path, features an imaginary friar who visits the kingdom of Prester John, here also called the empire of “Abdeselib,” following Dulcert.

contemporary corroboration of Carignano's lost text, the authors themselves caution against interpreting this discovery as indisputable evidence of the historicity of the early fourteenth-century Ethiopian embassy to Europe, citing its lack of mention in papal archives in addition to a lack of credible information about fourteenth-century Ethiopia in Galvaneus' account, along with the inclusion of “ideas and sources that we are able to some extent to identify precisely” in earlier European texts (Bausi and Chiesa, 2019: 45).

⁴⁷ Abdeselib is the name given to the land of Prester John's kingdom of Ethiopia in the *Book of Knowledge of All Kingdoms*.

In this text, the Prester is king of Ethiopia and Nubia, also encircled by the traditional biblical rivers, although, in this case, the Euphrates (rather than the Gyon) is cited as the central waterway. Last of these fourteenth-century Ethiopian Prester John narratives, crusading enthusiast Philippe de Mézières' "Dream of an Old Pilgrim" (1389) returns Prester John to the realm of the *LOPJ*: ruler over the "Three Indias," situated within Africa, on the border of the terrestrial paradise. That these texts differ in scope, genre, and provenance testifies to some early and abiding association between Prester John and Africa.

Some fifteen years after the *Chronicon Boemorum* was written, Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV (r. 1346–1378), the man who commissioned the chronicle, allegedly received a letter from the Ethiopian king. This letter (c. 1370), composed in Italian and addressed solely to the emperor, was written in the voice of "King Voddomaradeg, son of the most excellent King of Ethiopia . . . Prester John, King of Greater and Lesser India" (qtd. in Salvatore, 2011: 602).⁴⁸ Salvatore argues that the letter, an almost certain Italian forgery that nonetheless leverages some knowledge about Ethiopia, attests to Europe's fourteenth-century familiarity with Christian Ethiopia, if not with Emperor Wedem Arad (r. 1299–1314) himself, given what Salvatore, among others, has noted is a proximal phonetic resemblance (Salvatore, 2016: 6).⁴⁹ Krebs notes that this letter is one of four fourteenth-century texts to refer specifically to Ethiopian *nägäšt* (Krebs, 2020: 99). To add one more layer of curiosity, a fifteenth-century manuscript of the *LOPJ* (Brewer's MS.44) addresses itself to the same Charles IV, which suggests subsequent generations may have become familiar with the intercontinental discourse that shaped the letter from King Voddomaradeg (Brewer, 2015: 67n14, 303). Other correspondences with Ethiopian *nägäšt* followed. The first secular ruler to attempt to contact an Ethiopian *negus* was English King Henry IV, who clearly had the legendary priest-king on his mind: His 1400 letter was in fact addressed not to Dawit I (r. 1382–1413) but to Prester John. In his letter, he echoes Prester John lore that was now centuries old, requesting that the Ethiopian sovereign "rescue the Holy Sepulchre from the hands of the Infidels" and planning to meet this Prester John in Jerusalem to set these events in motion (qtd. in Krebs, 2020: 116).

The history of Prester John in Africa prior to the era of Portuguese sea exploration created the conditions by which the legend was able to survive in Africa. The scholarly focus on Portugal derives, in part, from a habit of early

⁴⁸ The text makes internal reference to "other times we sent you an embassy and we did not receive an answer," which scholars have cited as indirect evidence of the historicity of the 1306 embassy (Beckingham, 1996: 201).

⁴⁹ Krebs casts some doubt on this, noting that Wedem Arad died four years before Charles was born (Krebs, 2020: 99).

modern writers, who frequently misattributed the original Prester John and Ethiopia connection to the late fifteenth-century diplomatic and commercial mission of *Pêro da Covilhã*, who reached Ethiopia sometime after 1478. However, at least six letters addressed to an Ethiopian Prester John from European kings and popes predated the Portuguese courtier's expedition.⁵⁰ Much of Europe's earlier fifteenth-century interest in sub-Saharan Africa was due to the Ethiopian embassies that arrived in Europe early in the century.

Ethiopians in Europe

The first substantively documented Ethiopian embassy arrived in Europe in 1402, and another twenty-one Ethiopian "missions" to Latin Europe are attested from 1402 to 1543 (Krebs, 2020: 87–88).⁵¹ These missions were overwhelmingly understood as sent not by a specific Ethiopian *negus* but by Prester John, Lord of the Indies. Although this misapplied title became a common European substitute for the title for the Ethiopian sovereign, the appellation continued to carry expectations unreasonable to set upon any mortal ruler. Meanwhile, by the middle of the fifteenth century, there were small Ethiopian communities in Rome, Venice, and Cyprus (Hamilton, 1996b: 253).

The Italian phase of this path has roots in the fourteenth century, but the well-documented arrival of sub-Saharan Africans to Genoa, Venice, and Rome throughout the fifteenth century (Salvadore, 2016: 1–35) transformed the idea of an Ethiopian Prester John from hopeful rumor to actionable reality. Less than two years after King Henry IV of England sent a letter to the "King of Abyssinia, Prester John," the first of these embassies arrived in Venice in 1402. With Florentine Antonio Bartoli as guide, the Ethiopian embassy, sent by Emperor Dawit I, traveled through Venice with valuable gifts and returned to Ethiopia with gifts in turn, as well as a promised visit from European artisans. These early fifteenth-century visits helped open a "contact zone" between several Italian republics and Ethiopia that, combined with the notion of contact with Prester John's kingdom, inspired both military and mercantile hopes. Salvadore argues that these African travelers were "welcomed as intellectuals and diplomats in a variety of European locales" (Salvadore, 2016: 3). That several of these missions to Europe were "chaperoned" by a European also suggests the possibility of a community of Europeans who had already reached Ethiopia and associated themselves with the administrations therein.

⁵⁰ Henry IV of England (1400), Charles VI of France (1406), Pope Eugenius IV (1438, 1439, 1441), Pope Nicholas V (1455), Pope Callixtus III (1456), Pope Sixtus IV (1482).

⁵¹ Other scholars list the "official" embassies from Ethiopia to Europe in this period as fewer, between six and eight.

Continual visits of Ethiopians to Rome resulted in an intercultural exchange through which Rome became Europe's nexus for Africanist knowledge, "turning what had been a whimsical interest in Prester John into nothing less than a field of study" (Salvadore, 2016: 72). These Italian encounters with Ethiopians, who made their way into the Mediterranean through the Middle East, alerted other European locales to the possibility of collaboration with sub-Saharan Africa and its powerful Christian king. Neither the Catholic Church nor the secular sovereigns of Europe had unmasked the legendary facade they affixed onto the ruler behind these African embassies. The first among these non-Italian points of interest for Ethiopia was Aragon, given its king's aggressive expansion of power into the Mediterranean in the first half of the fifteenth century. As Dawit's successors and sons Yeshaq I (r. 1414–1429) and Zara Yaqob (r. 1434–1468) themselves sent embassies to Europe, these rulers, in an echo of the "king of Spains" sought in the alleged 1306 embassy, shifted their attention to Iberia.

Alfonso V, king of Aragon, Naples, and Sicily (r. 1416–1458), understanding the leverage that Italian city-states had now come to exercise in the burgeoning realm of global trade – in part due to their new connections with sub-Saharan Africa – embarked on a program to seize European control of this new, lucrative economy. He viewed Prester John as a key ally in this endeavor, imagining that such an alliance would provide military leverage along with the distinction of making first contact with the priest-king. Emperor Yeshaq, in a return to the inversion of the traditional Prester John narrative structure, desired an alliance in which European power(s) would invade Mamluk Egypt from the north while the emperor's forces would simultaneously enter Egypt from the south (Petry, 2022, 124–125). Ethiopian Christians, who had expanded their European travel into the Iberian Peninsula primarily for the sake of pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, reached Alfonso's court in 1427. At the helm of this embassy was Ali Tabrizi, a Persian merchant active in Cairo and Ethiopia. As Bartoli had requested in Venice, Tabrizi requested European artisans on behalf of Yeshaq but also proposed a double marriage between members of the two royal families. Alfonso appeared to have considered the proposal worthy of a reply. He equipped the delegation for the return journey and arranged to dispatch both a group of artisans and a personal representative, Pere de Bonia, who was instructed to collect intelligence on Ethiopia and, in particular, on the marriage proposal, which would have seen Emperor Yeshaq I (r. 1414–1429) wed an Ethiopian noblewoman to Alfonso's brother, Pedro (1406–1438). News of the visit reached as far as Rome, as recorded by Cardinal Guillaume Fillastre, but despite the investment, the envoys never reached Ethiopia.⁵²

⁵² In Cairo, Mamluk authorities apprehended and executed Ali Tabrizi for anti-Muslim activities. While sources are silent on the fate of Ali Tabrizi's party, later developments indicated that the artisans and de Bonia experienced the same fate (Salvadore, 2016: 43–44).

That the return embassy never reached Ethiopia only strengthened the desire among Alfonso and other European secular leaders to contact Prester John. As no European had yet traveled to Ethiopia and returned to tell the tale firsthand, leaders were still relying on, at best, secondhand accounts, all of which continued to map this twelfth-century legend onto fifteenth-century Ethiopia. The Council of Florence (1441) had identified Prester John as the Ethiopian Emperor Zara Yaqob (r. 1434–1468), renewing an already active search. Dominican Pietro Ranzano in his universal geography *Annales omnium temporum* records the observations of fellow Italian Pietro Rombulo, who claimed to have lived at the Ethiopian court for thirty-seven years and who claimed to be an ambassador from Zara Yaqob to King Alfonso. Rombulo told Ranzano exactly what he (and Alfonso) wanted to hear: This powerful king with a long narrative history of making powerful marriage alliances had immense wealth, tributary kings, and a mighty Christian army (Krebs, 2020: 113). Most interesting to Alfonso, however, was Prester John's relationship to that African waterway that had so fascinated crusaders and geographers alike: the Nile River.

Prester John and the Nile

As long as there were communities of non-European Christians who held a military advantage against perceived enemies of the Catholic Church there would remain incentive to rhetorically assimilate such communities into the historical/geographical tropes most familiar to a European readership. In an elastic return to the legend's desire to reveal the unknown world as a continuation of inherited knowledge and expectations, Prester John retained an association with the River Nile that persisted for several centuries and can be found in many texts of this narrative path. The ability to control the Nile functioned first and foremost as a military intelligence. The tradition in which the Ethiopian *negus* held control over the flow of this powerful waterway dates to the eleventh century (Knobler, 2017: 30). This association abided into the period in which Europeans sought military aid from Ethiopia, glimpsed, for example, when Ethiopian *negus* 'Amda-Seyon (r. 1314–1344) revived a threat against the Mamluks that he would turn the country into a desert by cutting off the Nile's flow (Silverberg, 1972: 148).⁵³ Since that point, European writers repeatedly claimed this power for Prester John.

The European fascination with this river hearkens back to the Bible and the geographical writings of antiquity. As mentioned, Europeans associated the Nile with the biblical Gihon (Genesis 2:13), which was in that book

⁵³ Beckingham notes that no Europeans writing about Ethiopia before 1320 mention the ability of its king to control the flow of the Nile (Beckingham, 1996: 203–206).

considered one of four rivers to branch off from the Phison, the waterway that ran from Eden through paradise (Genesis 2:10–12). For the Greek traveler Cosmas Indicopleustes (fl. sixth century), an important source for medieval European geography, the biblical Phison was in fact the river Indus, which runs from the Arabian Sea into the Indus valley before branching off into the Himalayas and Tibet (more on this in the final narrative path section).⁵⁴ The history of the European understanding of this river also helps historicize Europe's frequent conflation of sub-Saharan Africa with India, as it was not infrequently attested that the Nile and Indus were a single river (Mukherjee, 2018: 259). The Nile was also an important touchstone for medieval Isidoran (so-called T and O) maps, in which it is often depicted as the body of water that divides Africa and Asia. According to the *Liber monstrorum*, the fertile Nile is itself responsible for the genesis of monsters (Relaño, 2002: 34).

In addition to its biblical, geographic importance, there was also the topic of its source. In a story passed down from Ptolemy, several medieval and early modern geographers and cartographers placed the Nile's headwaters in a snow-capped mountain range in Ethiopia, commonly referred to as the "Mountains of the Moon." The search for these mountains and their elusive headwaters remained a preoccupation for European explorers and armchair travelers well into the eighteenth century (Relaño, 2002: 197–204); the myth is present in narratives as late as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), Jerónimo Lobo's *A Short Relation of the River Nile* (1669), and James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1790), among other texts. For these reasons, the story of the African Prester John cannot be understood outside of the long history of European fascination with the Nile.

Some earlier writers of this narrative path, including the Augustinian Jacopo da Verona (1335),⁵⁵ as well as the Franciscan John de' Marignolli (c. 1355), believed Prester John held direct control over the river's flow and could himself reduce Egypt to a crippling state of drought. Another group of writers elaborate on this connection from reported secondhand accounts. Niccolò da Conti relates to fellow traveler Pero Tafur that the Nile was "water of paradise" and describes Prester John's attempt to seek its source in the Mountains of the Moon as recorded in the latter's *Travels and Adventures* (c. 1454) (Tafur, 1926, ch. 8, ch. 20). According to Tafur's retelling, two intrepid explorers were able to discover the

⁵⁴ According to Isidore of Seville, the people of Ethiopia, descended from Cush, emigrated from the Indus Valley to settle the Nile Valley below Egypt (Barney et al., 2006: IX.ii.127).

⁵⁵ Some scholars, including myself (Taylor, 2023), have also discussed the journey and Prester John observations of Jacob von Bern, whom Matteo Salvatore has recently identified as merely another name for Jacopo da Verona.

source but refused to return to their party, who left the men on the mountain. The Burgundian Bertrandon de la Broquière's *The Voyage to Outremer* (1457) situates watchtowers in a canyon alongside the Nile, which Prester John "could easily move . . . to another course" but "let it be because there are many Christians living on the aforesaid [river]" (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 216). Prester John's restraint is also present for the Venetian *Alessandro Zorzi*, who from 1470 to 1538 recorded the first- and secondhand accounts of Italian travelers to Ethiopia. He learns from a "Brother Raphael" that "Presta Jani could take the water of the Nile from the Moors, so that it did not reach Cairo, but that he will not because he fears that the Moors would ruin the churches" and endanger the Christian monks spread throughout Egypt (qtd. in Salvadore, 2016: 30). Broquière's and Zorzi's explicit mentions of Cairo in their accounts recall the failures of the Fifth Crusade, especially since the former refers in a later passage to the Ethiopian king Lebna Dengel as "Davit" (Silverberg, 1972: 218). If nothing else, this callback to the long-anticipated King David, son of Prester John, helps illustrate the degree to which the Prester John project remained tied to the ambitions of the Catholic Church. After all, these stories circulated only 100 years after the Christian army of the Fifth Crusade was flooded into defeat by the very same river, and 200 years after the earliest rumors of a Prester John figure noted that he was not able to cross the River Tigris to aid the crusaders.

In George Abbot's *Briefe Description of the Whole Worlde* (1599), Prester John's threat becomes realized, as the author reports that Prester John had in fact flooded Egypt after "the great Turke" refused to pay Egypt's customary annual tribute to the priest-king (Abbot, 1664: 155–156). Later texts make more tangential associations. The Czech Franciscan *Remedius Prutký*, who was told by the Ethiopian emperor himself that there was no Prester John there, still ties the Prester John legend to the Nile, arguing in his *Travels* (1752) that it was the Arabic word for the Nile, "Aian," that European travelers mistook for the John they so desperately sought (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 265). Traces of these ideas can be found in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516) and Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (1590), showing how these associations had eclipsed the discourse of medieval and early modern geography and entered into the literary record.⁵⁶

Prester John in Cartographic Africa

As a cartographically accurate understanding of Africa was slowly emerging in European cities, early modern mapmakers used the kingdom of Prester John to lend geographic consistency and epistemological continuity to their presentation

⁵⁶ "And I have march'd along the River Nile, / To Machda, where the mighty Christian Priest / Cal'd John the great, sits in a milk-white robe. / Whose triple Myter did I take by force, / And made him sweare obedience to my crown" (1.3.186–90).

of the continent, often in explicit reference to the Nile.⁵⁷ Most influential among these was the *mappaemundi* (1459) of the merchant-soldier turned Camaldolese monk *Fra Mauro*. At the top (east) of Mauro's circular map, which measured six feet in diameter, the monk identifies Prester John's kingdom as an immense East African territory, with the land of "Abassia" at its center.⁵⁸ In some of the most faded ink on the whole map, below a section of the sinuous Nile, an inscription reads: "Qui el presto Janne fa ressidentia principal."⁵⁹ In inscribed commentary possibly influenced by the stories surrounding the travels of fellow Venetian Niccolò de' Conti, Mauro links Prester John's land to the terrestrial paradise by describing how the land's honey seeps into the water to create, with the aid of the sun, a river of wine (Brooks, 2010: 187). His power is here immense due to "the numbers of his people, who are almost infinite" (p. 187). He also notes the annual flooding of Egypt by the Nile, the source of which, he claims, was to be found in the kingdom of Prester John.

Although considered a crowning achievement of late medieval cartography, Mauro's map is also an example of a larger cultural tendency that early modern maps continued to exhibit: the reluctance among highly educated Europeans to dissociate from the inherited marvel of the "Old World" even as they became active participants in the burgeoning information economy of a globally interconnected "New World." Newly arrived, specialized knowledge continued to provide Europe's cartographers with ongoing geographic nuance, and yet associations with Prester John and the twelfth-century milieu the legend subtended continued to influence Europe's picture of sub-Saharan Africa. This tendency is evident even in maps that do not expressly identify a kingdom of Prester John. The *Egyptus Novelo* map (1454–1469), a detailed depiction of the Nile Basin possibly influenced by the presence of an Ethiopian delegation at the Council of Florence, illustrates Ethiopia with accurate place names heretofore undepicted in European cartography as well as with the mythical Mountains of the Moon.⁶⁰

While the insistent plotting of an imaginary kingdom on these maps represented an elastic return to an imagined Christian enclosure of the globe, such maps were also practical tools utilized for actual navigational purposes,

⁵⁷ Angelino Dulcert's *Portolan Chart*, (1339); Abraham Cresques' *Catalan Atlas* (1375), *Mercator Maps* (1569, 1628), *Hondius Map* (1606). It should be noted that other maps contemporaneously situated Prester John in Asia, including the Vesconte-Senudo map (1311), the *mappaemundi* contained in Paolino Veneto's *Chronologia magna* (c. 1321), and the globe of Martin Behaim (1492).

⁵⁸ Ethiopia is here understood as a separate place.

⁵⁹ Mauro also mentions that there existed rivers in Prester John's kingdom larger than the Nile (17-A5).

⁶⁰ Indicating the genealogy from which this map was conceived, the map then circulated in Latin copies of Ptolemy's second-century *Geographia*.

especially for seafarers. The Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator marketed his 1569 [map of the “terrestrial globe”](#) with explicit reference for its navigational utility. Another highly regarded map in its time, the Mercator map depicts *Prete Giam magnus imperator Abbissini*, the only personage he depicted in all of Africa, as what appears to be a white European seated on a throne holding a cross.⁶¹ Brooks notes that Mercator imagined the kingdom of Prester John “as being centered on the upper Nile River, evoking earlier traditions of the mighty priest-king possessing the power to regulate or shut off the flow of the life-giving Nile” (Brooks, 2014: 201). His grandson, also called Gerardus Mercator, depicts an apparently unaged Prester John in nearly the same manner in his 1628 map. In [Jodocus Hondius’](#) 1606 atlas, Prester John gets his own [page](#).⁶²

[Fra Mauro](#) found a patron for his *mappaemundi* in a man who prized navigational utility above all: the Portuguese [Dom Henrique](#), so-called Navigator. Combining the Venetian Mauro’s proximity to the most contemporary mercantile and ecclesiastical discourse with the navigational expertise of the Portuguese architect of the so-called Age of Discovery, the [Fra Mauro Map](#) (1459) was regarded as a supreme cartographical achievement (Brooks, 2010: 185–191). It was the Portuguese who most utilized such cartographic technology, quite explicitly to find Prester John. In the last phase of this narrative path, the Portuguese attempt to locate Prester John by combining the bellicose desires of the Aragon court with the mercantile aspirations of the Genoans and Venetians.

Portugal and Prester John

By the early fifteenth century, Portugal’s House of Avis began to flourish and envisioned, with the help of Prester John, a mercantile expansion into Africa pinned to hopes of undermining Arab control of the spice trade. Henry the Navigator, son of Portuguese King João I (r. 1385–1433), a major leader of this vision, shared three overarching goals, as chronicled by [Gomes Eanes de Zurara](#): gather knowledge of Africa’s western shores to establish trading relationships, learn of the reach of Islam into Africa, and identify any potential Christian allies against Islam, such as Prester John (Sanceau, 1944: 5–12; Silverberg, 1972: 197). The sheer amount of geographical knowledge that Henry sought and devoured led to a rather scattershot approach to finding the kingdom of Prester John. From the fifteenth into the seventeenth century, Portuguese explorers, missionaries, and envoys penned narratives in which

⁶¹ Refer to this Element’s conclusion for a fuller discussion of race in the Prester John legend.

⁶² For more on Prester John in maps, see Brooks (2014: 184–214), Hansard (2016), and Brewer (2015: 321–323).

they claim to interact with the Ethiopian Prester John themselves or at least had met those who had done so (Sanceau, 1944; Lawrance, 1992; Baldrige, 2012; Salvadore, 2016: 82–103). Most of these journeys were exceptionally difficult, leading to what Salvadore has described as the “tragic-comic flavor” of these narratives (Salvadore, 2016: 113). However difficult, a [legion of Portuguese missionaries and diplomats](#) published reflections on Prester John’s kingdom between 1450 and 1700.

Henry surmised that an intrepid European might find Prester John’s kingdom from the west by following the Senegal River, which he believed to connect to the Nile. In the 1480s, [Diogo Cão](#) said the same about the Congo River (Kurt, 2013: 10). A century later, Duarte Lopes, traveling in west Africa, situated Prester John somewhere east of the Congo in his *Report on the Kingdom of the Congo* (1591). In a 1455 letter, the Genoan explorer Antoniotto Usodimare cites his physical proximity to the kingdom of Prester John while in Gambia, near Africa’s western coast. As was true with the early modern maps, the journeys inspired by Henry allowed the imaginative legend to influence the European perceptions of Africa. This tendency is most evident in the highly exaggerated narrative of the exploits of Henry’s brother Pedro credited to Gómez de Santisteban. *The Book of the Infante Pedro* (1515) describes Dom Pedro’s adventures around the “Old World,” which culminates in a trip to a kingdom of Prester John populated with all the landmarks of the *LOPJ*, in which the hero delivers a letter from the Castilian king. This text went through hundreds of editions from the sixteenth into the eighteenth century from Spanish and Portuguese presses.

Besides Prince Henry, the Portuguese figure most associated with the Portugal and Prester John relationship was Pêro da Covilhã, who in 1493 met Emperor Eskender (r. 1478–1494) and became the first European to record a meeting with an Ethiopian ruler believed to be Prester John. Covilhã and fellow diplomat Afonso de Paiva were commissioned in 1487 by King João II (r. 1481–1495) to find a route through the Holy Land to Ethiopia with instructions to source valuable spices as well as the kingdom of Prester John (Silverberg, 1972: 201–205; Baldrige, 2012: 32–37). The two were dispatched just one year before the Portuguese explorer [Bartolomeu Dias](#) successfully reached East Africa by circumnavigating the continent’s southern tip and five years before the [Genoan Columbus](#), with a personally annotated copy of Polo’s kingdom of Prester John in hand, sailed west to seek that kingdom, among other things (Uebel, 2001: 270–277; Brewer, 2015: 286). Soon after, [Vasco da Gama](#) calls after Prester John at East African ports on his way to India, according to the [journal](#) (1497–1499) of a crewmember.

Covilhã and his partner separated in Cairo, the former desiring to seek intelligence on the spice trade in India, the latter dying unceremoniously in Egypt's capital. Covilhã eventually reached Ethiopia in 1493 and was met with a warm reception by Eskender, whom Covilhã understood to be Prester John, and who promised to send him back to Portugal with gifts and the possibility of alliance. However, Eskender died in 1494 and neither of his successors (Na'od and Lebna Dengel) allowed Covilhã to return, marooning the diplomat turned explorer in Ethiopia. Covilhã wrote a letter to the Portuguese king, which may or may not have arrived, and João, perhaps in response or perhaps out of concern, sent two Portuguese Jews, Joseph of Lamego and Abraham of Beja, to find out whether Covilhã had found Prester John (Beckingham, 1996: 287–289). The outcome of that visit is not clear, but we do know that Covilhã was still there some twenty-five years later when Francisco Álvares arrived at the Ethiopian court with Diogo Lopes de Sequeira in 1520. Álvares recorded Covilhã's adventures in his *A True Relation of the Lands of Prester John of the Indies* (which was itself only published by Luis Rodrigues in 1540, after Álvares' death). Álvares returned to Europe and in 1533 met with Pope Clement VII to discuss what he had learned of this land and its leader, whom Álvares referred to as “the most serene and powerful lord David, king of the great and high Ethiopia, by the masses called Prester John” (qtd. in Silverberg, 1972: 316).

Álvares' posthumous account of the exiled Covilhã became one of the most widely read Prester John texts of the early modern period, translated into Italian, French, German, and Spanish by the end of the sixteenth century (Kurt, 2013: 22). The success of the text is somewhat puzzling; it is the only example of a “bestselling” Prester John text that minimizes (or here eliminates) ties to the mythical twelfth-century context that informed other widely read accounts. For example, in retelling some of Álvares' narrative, Leo Africanus' *Description of Africa* (1550) casts Prester John as a “civil magistrate” rather than a priest (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 221). Nonetheless, it remained a touchstone in the history of the legend for it made clear that Prester John was not a person but an *inherited title* to refer to the Ethiopian *negus*, here Lebna Dengel (Brewer, 2015: 21–22). The stories of Covilhã and Álvares influenced the notable Prester John narratives of Damião de Góis (1540), Richard Hakluyt (1589), Samuel Purchas (1613), and Samuel Johnson (1759).

At the opening of the sixteenth century, it seems that Álvares' popular account of Prester John had already altered Europe's relationship with the legendary figure. Specifically, the promise of a military alliance, a foundational theme of the legend, began to fade. This was not due to a lack of effort. In 1509, Queen Eleni, empress of the former emperor Zara Yaqob (r. 1434–1468) and

regent of the young Lebna Dengel (r. 1507–1540), penned a letter to the Portuguese King Manuel I (r. 1495–1521) that allegedly reached the king in 1513 (Silverberg, 1972: 210–211). The letter, later collected in Damião de Góis’ *Legatio* (1532), acknowledged Portugal’s request for military aid and introduced an Armenian ambassador/envoy Matthew who would arrive in Portugal to confirm the support of the Ethiopian court. Matthew’s arrival, coupled with that of Álvares’ party, signaled to the Portuguese king that an alliance with Prester John was certain; the king expressed this sentiment in a 1521 letter to Pope Leo X (Silverberg, 1972: 263). The pope responded, suggesting the possibility of a “treaty” with Prester John. Meanwhile, the oft-mistreated Matthew arrived in Ethiopia and traveled to Goa to inform the viceroy of Portuguese India Afonso de Albuquerque of the Ethiopian emperor’s intentions. The hope of such an alliance had faded, however, as the European leaders Matthew met began to question his authority and background. As Beckingham summarizes, Matthew “had proved to be a heretic, not a Nestorian like Hugh of Jabala’s potentate, but an unrepentant Monophysite” (Beckingham, 1996: 24). The *Legatio*, which follows the story of Matthew, describes these Christians (and thus the kingdom of Prester John) not as potential allies but as schismatic heretics in need of conversion (Silverberg, 1972: 299).

Accounts, imaginings, and echoes of an Ethiopian Prester John would trickle into European popular culture even into the twentieth century, but the widespread hope that a powerful African king would convert to Catholicism and provide aid to their European brethren had begun to diminish again, even among the Portuguese. The narrative framework of an Asian Prester John had even returned to vogue. As early as the fifteenth century, Pietro Ranzano’s *Annales omnium temporum* (1407–1450) discusses the author’s meeting with the aforementioned Pietro Rombulo, who had spent thirty-seven years at the Ethiopian court, and who himself identifies Prester John not with the *negasti* but with the rulers of China. Jesuits missionaries Benedict Goës (1605) and Fernão Guerreiro (1608) as well as Nicolão Godinho (1615) argued that overeager Portuguese missionaries had conflated the presence of Christians in Ethiopia with the kingdom of Prester John, though these men seem to make the same mistake in their travels to China, where they insist Prester John once lived. These sentiments are echoed in Manoel de Almeida’s *The History of High Ethiopia or Abassia*.⁶³ And finally, in a narrative that serves as a fitting cap to this narrative path, Jerónimo Lobo, who spent nearly two decades in Ethiopia, argues, in *A Short Relation of the River Nile* (1669), that the association of

⁶³ This text is contained in *The Travels of the Jesuits in Ethiopia* (1660), written by fellow Jesuit Balthazar Tellez.

Prester John with Ethiopia can be reduced to an unsound linguistic misattribution, discussed in the final narrative path section of this Element. Lobo avers that “there remains nothing at present in all the East, but the bare Names of the Fields, in wyhich this Celebrated Cathay Stodd, and its Emperor Prester John reignd” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 283). Echoing the failures of the Italians and Portuguese to establish a military partnership with the Ethiopian sovereign, Prester John, Lobo insists, was a long-dead king in Asia.

Pop History Prester John (Path Four)

In addition to texts that used firsthand observation (or at least historical logic) to place Prester John among Crusaders, Mongols, or Ethiopians, there exists a category of narratives for which Prester John’s identity, though still tied to some empirical reality, willfully enters the realm of myth, superstition, and classical geography in order to return the legend’s foundational themes within a “modern” historical frame. These narratives contain very little historicizing detail, on the one hand, which excludes them from the first three narrative paths; on the other hand, these texts stop short of integrating Prester John into other narrative traditions, evident in the literary narratives (path five). To be sure, even the most observationally grounded narratives concerning this figure dally somewhat with the world of rumor. However, beginning in the later fourteenth century, Prester John became an important touchstone in a burgeoning genre of popular history being composed in Western Europe that sought to collate contemporary geographical information about the “New World” with rumor, myth, and prophecy associated with the “Old World” to create bias-confirming, sometimes overtly ideological ethno-geographies. Within these stories, Prester John enjoys a representational rather than active role.

Of those already mentioned, [Marco Polo](#)’s text comes closest to this hybrid designation, given its wide circulation and its literary flourishes. However, because Polo’s text does not embellish the account of Prester John himself, it remains categorized in this Element with the other narratives that present Prester John as a historical figure. For a text to fit this pop history narrative path, it should imbue the Prester John story with what Geraldine Heng, describing *Mandeville’s Travels*, terms a “romance character,” characterized by “inextricably conjoined, seamlessly indistinguishable fact and fantasy” (Heng, 2003: 240).

Given this working definition, it makes sense to start with that most representative text of this narrative path. Written from the persona of an almost certainly fictional English knight, *The Book of John Mandeville* (c. 1360s) relates a highly imaginative journey from England through Jerusalem, the

world's center, to the gates of the Earthly Paradise and back, as “Mandeville” understood the world as round. While adhering to the basic Prester John story found in the Mongol narrative path,⁶⁴ *Mandeville's Travels* greatly expands Prester John's realm, positioning it on the precipice of the earthly paradise in the imaginary, antipodal land of Pantaxore, located “foot agaynst foot to Englonde” (de Worde, 1499: f. lxxxxvi v). On the other side of the world, Prester John's kingdom (and the wider East) is consistently framed in relation to familiar sites of Christendom, even as the land itself proves more inherently Christian than the European *terroir* from which the pseudonymous Mandeville writes.

Mandeville walks his reader through Christian geographic markers, much like the *LOPJ*, in a manner that more closely resembles the scenery of a medieval cycle play than a travelogue: Japheth's city Joppa, the kingdom of Arabia where Magi came from, Joseph's barn, Moses' burning bush, Lot's grave, Noah's Ship, and the edge of the earthly paradise. Moreover, Mandeville uses these kernels of biblical history to manifest the Christian materiality of the East's geography: bananas naturally produce crosses when split open, birds revere the Virgin Mary, abbeys naturally repel pests, and a tree that survived the death of Christ refuses to grow.

Curiously, Prester John's kingdom itself is described as more technologically Christian than naturally so. Prester John must engineer the facade of natural marvel: “[Prester John] had y-maked a condite [pipeline] under erthe so that when he walde, that condyte shold renne somtyme mylke, somtyme wyne, and somtyme hony. And this place is called Paradise” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 201). The juxtaposition between the innate sanctity of his surroundings and the artificial marvel of his own kingdom betrays some doubt over the messianic potential of Mandeville's Prester John. What's more, the *Travels* includes statements that recall those found in narrative path two that diminish Prester John's might: “this Gret Chane [of the Mongols] is the grettest lord of the worlde. Prester John is noght so gret as he” (p. 197). The only thing that keeps Prester John from eclipsing the power of the “Great Chane,” the *Travels* suggests, is the remoteness of his realm: Merchants rarely travel as far as John's kingdom and are instead able to “fyndeth in the ile of Catay [Cathay] all that they have nede to” (p. 197).⁶⁵ For “Mandeville,” Prester John is real and he is powerful and he proves that even the most inaccessible parts of the world are Christian, and yet his kingdom is too far away – and perhaps too artificial – to factor into the global economy.

⁶⁴ Mandeville's narrative borrows freely from those of Vincent of Beauvais, John of Plano Carpini, Ascelin of Lombardia, William of Rubruck, Marco Polo, and Odoric of Pordenone.

⁶⁵ The seeds of this notion are found in Marco Polo's *Travels* (Moule and Pelliot, 1938: 397–398).

And then there is the text's popularity. Perhaps due to its wide proliferation – there exist versions in English, Latin, Spanish, German Dutch, Bohemian, Danish, and Gaelic – *Mandeville's Travels* was not only continuously read but regarded as a geographical authority across Europe well into the seventeenth century. Antonio de Torquemada (1507–1569), for example, uses the authority of Mandeville to argue against the contemporary inclination to place Prester John in Africa in his *Garden of Curious Flowers* (1573). Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1589) describes Mandeville as an “erudite and distinguished author” (qtd. in Brooks, 2010: 88). In *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (1613), Samuel Purchas considers him “the greatest Asian traveler that ever the world had” (qtd. in Silverberg, 1972: 148). *Mandeville's Travels* found a way to perpetuate the legend of Prester John from a place of historical authority, all the while releasing this figure from the expectations of historical arrival.

A host of narratives followed in Mandeville's stead, freeing Prester John from the missionary and mercantile desires of his European audience. The first of these is Johannes Witte de Hese's *Itinerarium* (c. 1389–1424), which featured another imagined persona masquerading as a historical traveler. Although less popular than Mandeville's Witte de Hese's narrative was compiled into several Prester John chapbooks at the turn of the sixteenth century – including seven printed editions in the 1490s alone.⁶⁶ Hese follows Mandeville in coordinating his journey around important sites of Christian history, including the court of Prester John. Curiously, the *Itinerarium* places Prester John's kingdom in Edessa, a key locale of the legend's initial context, and describes a palace that rivals that of the *LOPJ* in terms of opulence and imagination. Whereas Mandeville fails to reach the earthly paradise located just beyond Prester John's kingdom, Johannes claims to trespass across this existential borderland, here called “Radix Paradisi,” thus “out-Mandevilling Mandeville” (Westrem, 2001: ll. 378–379; Silverberg, 1972: 221).

Not all narratives of this path place Prester John at the eastern limits of the knowable world. Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* (1544) revives much of the lore from the *LOPJ* but departs from Mandeville and Hese when it identifies Prester John as the emperor of Ethiopia. Unlike the texts of narrative path three, the *Cosmographia* makes no attempt to increase European knowledge about Africa in general or Ethiopia in particular. Instead, characteristic of this narrative path four, Münster validates the legendary inhabitants of John's kingdom as authentic marvels in one breath and undermines them as fabular posturing in another. While he describes the kingdom as a land

⁶⁶ Westrem, editor and translator of the text, observes that this narrative was often bound with works of theology, history, natural science, and geography (Westrem, 2001: xii); cf. Silverberg (1972: 221–223).

populated with giants, pygmies, cynocephali, and other classical tropes of Eastern travel lore, he later comments that “[m]any other such trifles and vncredible thinges the Jewes doe fable uppon the lande of Preto Ihoan, which are so farre beyonde . . . likelyhode . . . that I thought it better to omit them” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 220).⁶⁷ As evident in Mandeville, this tendency to amplify in one breath what is diminished in the next helped keep the Prester John fire alive without stoking the flame.

Edward Webbe, another author who may have been a persona, fabricates another popular history masquerading as travel narrative, one that continued to repackage the contents of the *LOPJ* as contemporary, historical fact. Although his *Trauailes* (1590) offers a standard account of the kingdom of Prester John, Webbe, reputed “master gunner” for the English military, introduces his discussion of the legend by mentioning that he had fought against the priest-king as a mercenary for the Turks. Despite minimal mention of the Prester John legend, the book centralized Prester John’s kingdom to such a degree that, though a travelogue covering nearly half of Asia, each of the three woodcuts contained in early printed versions featured an imaginary creature of Prester John’s realm.⁶⁸

In George Abbot’s *Briefe Description of the Whole Worlde* (1599), Abbot reports the familiar tale of Prester John controlling the Nile’s flow but falsely – perhaps hopefully – claims that the Nile “of late . . . drowned up a great part of the Countrey of Egypt” (Abbot, 1664: 156). For the Anglican Abbot, future archbishop of Canterbury, Prester John is in no way associated with the Catholic Church, a feature of his identity so desired for writers of the Ethiopian path. Abbot goes on to associate Prester John’s land instead with familiar exotic travel tropes such as the *lunae montes* and a river full of “the best precious stones of any river in the world” (pp. 155, 184). Concluding his discussion of Africa, Abbot abruptly shifts focus to Thule, the legendary northernmost point in classical cartography. In other words, for Abbot, Abyssinia, and thus Prester John, functions, like Thule, as geographical, existential, dispositional borderlands, marking the periphery of a Eurocentric conception of human experience.

In other words, the Prester John of medieval and early modern popular history does not threaten the ambit of European ideas and actions. In texts of this path, we find Prester John’s kingdom both changed and unchanged, historical and fabular, “discovered” and unreachable. For such narratives, the location

⁶⁷ A “direct copy” of this narrative is found nearly 100 years later in Donald Lupton’s *Emblems of Rarities* (1636).

⁶⁸ Webbe’s reputed experience in Russia may be a source for future Russian “Old Believers” who theorize the realm of Prester John as a haven for religious dissenters and transport this utopia to the island of Japan; cf. Manning (1922).

of Prester John's kingdom mattered less than its marvelousness and functional uselessness. By placing Prester John's kingdom at the very limits of traversable geography, out of touch with a developing global economy, narratives of this path helped perpetuate a legend that, in other narrative paths, forced readers to *choose* between instruction and entertainment. The first three narrative paths covered the former, while this final path discusses narratives that firmly plant Prester John in the realm of imagination.

Prester John as Literary Figure (Path Five)

The previous narrative paths have shown that, for some, Prester John remained historical reality as a personage or a title from the twelfth to the seventeenth century. It is also true that, as early as the thirteenth century, Prester John had, for others, already transformed into a fictional character, an imagined hero freely available to be integrated into other narrative traditions. Over the course of 800 years, discussions of the Prester John legend infiltrated some of medieval and early modern Europe's most canonical literary texts. From the late twelfth and through to the twenty-first century, Prester John became everything from Arthurian knight to Zulu revolutionary to Marvel superhero, testifying once again to the malleability of the legend as well as its elastic return to one of its foundational functions, helping reveal the exotic corners of the imagination as somehow already familiar and known. Within these narratives, there emerge two general patterns for how the authors situate Prester John: He is either a figure that governs from some interstitial authority or one placed physically and epistemologically at the edge of the intelligible world.

The factors that allowed for the transformation of Prester John from a historical (or even legendary) personage into a literary character are numerous and fascinating but exceed the scope of this Element. Nor is this the appropriate space to theorize what distinguishes "literary" writing from historical or otherwise revelatory writing in the medieval and early modern periods. For the purposes of this Element, "literary" narratives are simply those that privilege entertainment over factual instruction. The narratives of this path can be distinguished from those of path four primarily due to their lack of engagement with world geographies new or old, along with their insistence on Prester John as a character or rhetorical figure, without any suggestions of historicity.

Such a shift toward the entertainment function of the legend is evident even within the early transmission history of the *LOPJ*. As vernacular copies of the *LOPJ* began to proliferate in the early thirteenth century, translators not only added other legendary material – in what are now referred to as separate interpolations of the *LOPJ* – but also, in at least one case, entirely altered its

structural framework. In a mid thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman translation, a self-proclaimed former crusader named Roau d'Arundel transforms the epistolary, supposedly historical *LOPJ* into something more closely resembling a medieval romance.⁶⁹ Not only does its translator render the Latin prose into Anglo-Norman verse; he also befits the *LOPJ* with a prologue and epilogue. Moreover, his curious repetition of the word *rumanz*, an infamously vague Old French word, including a reference to the *LOPJ* itself as “cest rumanz,” suggests a conscious structural transformation of the legend’s purpose and genre (Taylor, 2014: 231–234). A similar impulse can be observed a few decades later in England when an Anglo-Norman prose translation of the Latin *LOPJ* would be compiled into the miscellany of fabliau, romance, didactic, and devotional texts now known as Bodleian MS Digby 86.

Soon after the *LOPJ* began to find itself in the company of new genres, the figure of Prester John began to appear as part of other narrative universes. The most unsurprising of these is the way Prester John was integrated into a biblical genealogy as a means of providing the legendary figure with a thicker and more palatable Christian backstory. This impulse can be traced back to Otto of Freising’s chronicle (1143), in which Prester John is first linked with the Magi. Later writers began to expand upon the backstory of the Magi, which had circulated within and around the German context in which the *LOPJ* emerged (Hamilton, 1996a: 171–185). The biblical association helped legitimize the non-Catholic Prester John as a plausible ally and also modeled a *rex et sacerdos* able to provide *auctoritas* to justify the sovereignty of a Holy Roman emperor. This narrative tradition culminates in John of Hildesheim’s *Historia trium regum* (before 1375) in which Prester John was given a biblical lineage. In this narrative, Melchior, Balthasar, and Gaspar (the latter linked to the *LOPJ*’s King Gundafor) are converted by the Apostle Thomas years after visiting the infant Christ. They are then made archbishops.

Upon the death of Thomas, these three Magi are tasked with choosing a new leader of Indian Christians, whom they call Prester John (here “Preter Johan”), so called in reference to John the Evangelist (Brewer, 2015: 209). Under this leadership there also exists a “Patriarch Thomas,” modeled on the Apostle Thomas, who serves as the country’s spiritual leader. In this leadership framework, however, Prester John reigns as the true sovereign of Indian Christians. At the end of the narrative, John of Hildesheim folds in aspects of the Mongol Prester John narratives, writing that the current Prester John, failing to heed a message delivered by the Magi in a dream, sends his son David in his stead to face defeat by a Mongol army, in a story that parallels that told by Marco Polo,

⁶⁹ This version of the *LOPJ* survives in two manuscripts, edited and translated by Vitale (1975).

among others.⁷⁰ Prester John cannot affect the future from this vantage, but he can provide a genealogical, biblical foundation for the *rex et sacerdos* ideology of kingship that the Holy Roman Empire had actively pursued.

While some writers worked to assimilate the exotic figure of Prester John into a familiar history of Christianity, other early adaptations extrapolated on those exoticizing details to further integrate Prester John into the European genre of Eastern lore. The *Elyseus Narrative*, written within thirty years of the composition of the *LOPJ*, had already made Prester John's court the endpoint of a narrative journey meant to entertain. The anonymous author builds out the framework of the *De adventu*, supplying as protagonist an Indian-born priest traveling to Prester John's kingdom. It also expands on the miracles of St. Thomas. Similarly, the first of 100 short fictional narratives in *Il Novellino* (c. 1290–1300) offers a Prester John morality tale in the vernacular, in which the priest-king sends an emissary with three magical stones to the court of "Frederick" (likely Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II) who ultimately disappoints the Indian potentate and therefore does not receive the magical stones. Around the same decade as *Il Novellino*, the anonymous *Tree of Seth* relates a fictional journey from Europe to the court of Prester John, who is the guardian of a magical tree.

Still other writers assimilated Prester John into other culturally impactful narrative universes in which he might survive longer. In *Parzival* (early thirteenth century), Wolfram von Eschenbach not only incorporates Prester John into Arthurian lore; he also builds John into English history. In the text, Prester John becomes a distant descendant of Parzival, himself a distant descendant of Arthur. More specifically, Wolfram declares Prester John to be the son of Parzival's biracial half-brother Feirefiz, who accepts Christian baptism, moves to India with the Grail maiden Repanse de Schoye, and becomes the keeper of the Grail. At the narrative's close, the couple gives birth to a son, Prester John, who is declared to be the future keeper of the Grail and whose name becomes a *title* for future kings of Indian Christians. Wolfram thus marks Prester John, genealogically and physically, as simultaneously European and something other. Notably, *Parzival* makes no explicit reference to the *legend* of Prester John. Rather than accrete onto what is already a dense historical tradition, Wolfram connects two worlds.

The *Parzival* story is continued in Albrecht von Scharfenberg's *Younger Titurel* (1270). *Younger Titurel* continues the notion that Prester John (still the son of Feirefiz and Repanse de Schoye) had become keeper of the Grail, held in

⁷⁰ The Magi spiritually urge the khan to make peace with Prester John, successfully suggesting that the son of one marry the daughter of the other. Once this alliance is reached, the Nestorians are left without a leader.

India. When Parzival visits India to meet his half-brother Feirefiz, he is treated to a description of the realm lifted directly from the *LOPJ*, the full text of which circulated in some manuscript versions of Albrecht's romance. In Albrecht's kingdom of Prester John the Grail finds its final resting place. Where Wolfram created a novel link between Prester John and the Matter of Britain, Albrecht opted to continue an older association. As Giardini has noted, several of Albrecht's characters, and more particularly the Grail Castle itself, utilize imagery of a black eagle on a golden background, the emblem of the Holy Roman Empire (Giardini, 2023: 146). Giardini shows that the *Titurel* and *Three Kings* are just two examples of a larger community of Prester John narratives linked to the German idea of universal empire. The association makes sense, given the popular theory that the *LOPJ* itself was created within the political circles surrounding the Staufens kings – Otto of Freising was uncle to Frederick Barbarossa – and that some early copies of the *LOPJ* are addressed to a “Federecus.”⁷¹

Two other less explicitly Arthurian “romances” from the early seventeenth century, both titled *Tom a Lincoln*, feature Prester John not as a divinely chosen Christian ruler but as an explicitly non-Christian inhabitant of the wider questing world. Both narratives relate the adventures of Tom and his fellow Knights of the Round Table and feature a scene with Prester John. In the later of these narratives, a dramatized romance tentatively attributed to Thomas Heywood, Tom and his fellow knights reach the realm of Prester John. After Tom defeats a dragon, Prester John refuses to allow his daughter “Anglitora” to marry Tom (a strange echo of narratives in the Mongol path). The two abscond together, leaving John and his grieving queen Bellamy to commit suicide. Niayesh points out that “[n]o reference is made here to Prester John's being a Christian; in fact, he actually swears by ‘the gods’ (l. 2529) like a true pagan” (Niayesh, 2012: 55). It would be easy to cast aside these uninfluential accounts of Prester John's descent into stereotypical romance antagonist as unremarkable were it not for a similar transformation in the Mongol path.

One of the most popular medieval literary treatments of Prester John subtly integrates the priest-king into the Matter of France. Andrea da Barberino's prose chivalric romance *Il Guerrin Meschino* (composed in 1409), which circulated widely in manuscript form before undergoing twenty-one printings by 1512, tells the story of young Guerrino, a Carolingian descendant cast away by pirates and raised as “Meschino” (unlucky, wretched, ignoble), who leaves Byzantium to seek the identity of his parents (Baranda, 1991). What results is a Mandevillian journey

⁷¹ Wagner (2000) classifies these copies of the *LOPJ* addressed as “Tradition II.” Giardini (2023) notes that a fourteenth-century copy of the *LOPJ* written in German also links the *LOPJ* to the return of then-dead Emperor Frederick II.

of magic, prophecy, and traditional Eastern lore that takes the young warrior from the Holy Land to India, where Guerrino arrives at the kingdom of Prester John. Barberino takes time to carefully describe the opulence of Prester John's palace, and, after Guerrino wins a battle, Prester John, who claims to have been alive since the time of Alexander the Great, offers the young warrior half of his kingdom. This incredibly popular text influenced a wave of Prester John chapbooks that similarly focused on the lavish court of Prester John, including Guiliano Dati's *The Great Magnificence of Prester John* (c. 1499) and later editions of Giacomo Filippo Foresti's *Supplementum chronicarum* (1483), which included his *Treatise on the Pontificate of Prester John* (1485, printed first in 1499).⁷²

The *Treatise* blends India and Ethiopia into a single realm and casts Prester John as the *rex et sacerdos* but otherwise does not offer anything novel. Guiliano Dati, renowned in his time for his rhymed recounting of Columbus' voyage, composed *The Great Magnificence* and a sequel, the *Second Song of India*, both expansions of *Meschino* and the *Treatise*. These popular texts offer little in terms of invention but evidence the appetite for Prester John lore in early sixteenth-century Europe. Brooks has discussed the curiously European visage of the frontispiece's Prester John, which typifies this era's impulse to Europeanize India (Brooks, 2014: 159–161). Such an impulse, evident also in texts that integrate Prester John into the Matter of Britain, testifies to a foundational theme of the legend: to help reveal the exotic corners of the world as already familiar.

The more explicitly Charlemagnian *Orlando Furioso* or “Mad Roland” (1516) takes place against the background of the war between Charlemagne's Christian paladins and the Saracen army. In this context, Ludovico Ariosto introduces a Christian Ethiopian priest-king called Senapo who rules over an immensely wealthy kingdom stretching from Nubia to the Red Sea and who, unsurprisingly, controls the flow of the Nile. Although Senapo appears only in a side quest in Canto XXXIII, Ariosto makes explicit that this Senapo is also called Prester John (Ariosto, 1607, EEBO):

Most true it is, else some haue written lies,
The Sowdan to this King doth tribute pay,
For that in this Kings powre alone it lies,
Great Cayre and fertile Egypt to decay,
Because that by those meanes he may deuise,
He may turne Nyle from them another way:
This Prince Senapo there is cald of many,
We call him Prester Iohn or Preter Iany.

⁷² For more on this wave of Prester John texts, see Silverberg (1972: 221–224).

Like Barberino, Ariosto takes care to focus attention on the opulent palace itself but also hints at the commercial possibilities that subtend a land overflowing with “the very things that are so costly in our own lands” (Harington, 1607, EEBO).

What makes *Orlando Furioso* significant in the history of Prester John literary narratives is that Ariosto’s is the earliest literary narrative to render the priest-king’s infamous pride into something destructive and decidedly un-Christian. In a narrative twist that may have influenced Milton’s Satan, Prester John has been blinded and suffers constant torment and hunger because he had

Grew proud as Lucifer, amidst his peers,
And thought to wage war upon his Maker,
And proceeded to attack the very mount
Where Egypt’s mighty river has its fount.
(Harington, 1607, EEBO)

Because of his hubris, which, appropriately enough, culminates in an attempt to discover the earthly paradise by seeking the Nile’s source, Senapo is rendered blind and made to suffer interminable hunger. Senapo/Prester John has lost faith in a prophesied rescue, but when the English Knight Astolfo (a potential avatar of Mandeville) arrives on his hippogriff, Prester John is shown what a fulfilled prophecy looks like. The clever reversal of the legend’s structure is as elegant as it is cynical, indicating that this king will not save Europe and suggesting that it is the realm of romance, of literature, that will save Prester John. These Matter of France revivalist texts integrate Prester John to represent that fundamentally Christian nature of the wider chivalric world but also indicate the danger attending faith placed in the promise of far-flung lands.

And yet once that faith is lost, it no longer becomes necessary to imagine Prester John as Christian or as an ally. Niayesh argues that Richard Johnson’s *Historie of the Seaven Champions of Christendom* (c. 1596) further distances Prester John from the role of anticipated savior by casting him as the generic Saracen antagonist of early Matter of France romances (Niayesh, 2012: 164). In Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* (c. 1599), we encounter another example of Prester John as antagonist. Although he is only very briefly mentioned, Prester John functions no longer as Christian savior to seek out, but instead as an African king to vanquish:

And I have march’d along the River Nile,
To Machda, where the mighty Christian Priest
Cal’d John the great, sits in a milk-white robe.

Whose triple Myter did I take by force,
 And made him sweare obedience to my crowne.
 (1.3.186-90)

While this line is spoken by Techelles, the now King of Fez, and though the larger play concerns the exploits of Turco-Mongol conqueror Timur (1336–1405), the small inclusion of Prester John echoes the message of Ariosto’s Senapo: Prester John is unable to influence contemporary historical events, but he can remain relevant as a point of cultural reference.

In the texts of this path this far, authors have situated Prester John interstitially: as demi-god, racially mixed, heretical Christian, *rex et sacerdos*, person and persona, simultaneously classical and modern. In these texts, the inclusion of Prester John is meant to illuminate the subtle familiarities that populate the spaces beyond the purview of European Latin Christendom. At the same time, other stories about the priest-king used Prester John to express rhetorical hyperbole. In some of the most canonical world literature texts, Prester John comes to stand in for extremity, limits, and extent.

Some texts use Prester John as a metonymy of the limits of geography within literary narrative. For example, in the ninth story of day eight of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1351) oft-appearing trickster Bruno dupes a gullible doctor into paying to join a fictional secret Florentine society in which women from all over the world see to the members’ every desire. To convince the doctor that this group of women truly includes all the queens of the world, Bruno submits just one example to illustrate this breadth of the society’s royal retinue of femininity, that of Prester John’s wife, whom he describes as possessed of a barely visible horn in her rump. In Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598–1599), the obliging, acerbic Benedick invokes Prester John to demonstrate the extremity of his willingness to leave the company of his current rival and future wife Beatrice. He tells his lord Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, that he will travel “to the world’s end” to please him, even offering to “bring [Don Pedro] the length of Prester John’s foot” (II.i.266–271) to illustrate the boundlessness nature of his eagerness. Book XI of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) alludes to the land of Prester John to note how far Adam’s progeny had spread across the world.

Other writers use the legend of Prester John to represent less material limits. Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605) uses the land of Prester John as an example of a literary embellishment that renders chivalric narratives too fanciful to be intellectually satisfying. Discussing the nature of Quixote’s delusions, a canon priest estimates that only a “barbarian and uncultured” imagination could derive entertainment from a story in which a magical ship can sail from Lombardy to “the land of Prester John” in a single night (Cervantes, 1981: 374).

For the canon, the term “Prester John” is antonymous with verisimilitude, and such a deviation from lived reality strays too far along the path of idle entertainment.

Several less popular seventeenth-century English plays continue to invoke the legend of Prester John as an indicator of extent. In *The Legend of Captaine Jones* (1648), a poem satirizing the cult of admiration surrounding Jamestown’s Captain John Smith, David Lloyd (1597–1663) employs the Prester John legend to indicate just how inflated the legend of John Smith had become in England. That Lloyd’s John Smith stand-in, Captain Jones, was, of all English citizens, chosen to “goe in ambassy to Prester John” reflected the extreme limits of John Smith’s national renown (Lloyd, 1656, EEBO). Earlier in the decade, the English playwright Richard Brome (c. 1590–1652) invokes the priest-king in *The Antipodes* (1638, EEBO) to signify the extent of a character’s Mandeville-brained gullibility:

He talks much of the Kingdom of Cathay,
Of one great Khan, and goodman Prester John,
(Whatever they be), and says that khan’s a clown
unto the John he speaks of. And that John
dwells up almost at Paradise. But sure his mind
is in a wilderness: For there he says
are Geese that have two heads a piece, and hens
that bear more wool upon their backs than sheep.

This familiar story of Prester John from the Mongol path is no longer credible history; instead, this character’s belief in Prester John signals gullibility and untrustworthiness.

Finally, in another minor seventeenth-century English play, *Love’s a Lottery and a Woman the Prize* (1699), Joseph Harris (c. 1650–1715) introduces a grifting doctor, who, advertising the extent of his medical abilities, takes credit for Prester John’s unlikely longevity. The doctor claims to have discovered Prester John dead in China, but “took his Head that had been sever’d from his Body, and buried a whole Fortnight, and set it on his Shoulders again, and mad him as brisk and lively, as e’re I saw him in all y life” (Harris, 1699: 19, EEBO). To reanimate a long-dead Prester John is to attest to the extent of this doctor’s abilities, but like the other texts that invoke Prester John to signal a limit, the usage here is abidingly rhetorical. Breathing life into Prester John is an achievement only a grifter would attempt and only a fool would believe. That is to say, while some used literature to extend the life of Prester John, another community of writers viewed the irrelevance and/or irrationality of the legend as a damning example of human folly. Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor* (1857) perhaps best captures such a sentiment when signaling the fallen social status of

the book's protagonist: "if I mention your name in company, the men look as if I had spoken of Prester John" (Brontë, 1874: 210).

False Etymologies, Prester John as a Title, and the Dalai Lama (Path Six)

Following the emerging awareness that the Ethiopian *negus*, while powerful in many respects, was not the crusading ally early modern popes and kings had anxiously anticipated, the Prester John frenzy so active in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries began to diminish. In fact, a number of writers, including Portuguese missionaries so insistent a century earlier on Prester John's Ethiopian Christian kingdom, returned to the argument that Prester John was, in fact, an Asian monarch.⁷³

Why was this? There were two related factors: first, the emergence of complex etymological arguments to explain the misattribution of the title Prester John onto the Ethiopian *negasti* and, second, the assumption implicit in that endeavor – that Prester John was not a man but a title. These arguments brought some writers back to the earlier "Asian hypothesis" and it brought a group of other, later writers to one more possible point of identification: Tibet.

The Genealogy of a Title

It did not take long for a narrative path to emerge that categorized Prester John no longer as *indorum rex*,⁷⁴ but as a title to be passed down, whether Keeper of the Grail, a designated line of Eastern kings, or the temporal ruler of Indian Christians. This tradition begins with the early thirteenth-century *Parzival*. In the text's last chapter, Wolfram writes that after Grail bearer Repanse de Schoye "gave birth . . . in India, to a son, who was called Johan," she and Feirefiz decided to call him Prester John, and "forever they retained that name for the kings there" (Eschenbach, 2006: 344–345). Brewer refers to this moment as a "conceptual transition" that creates space for Prester John as both man and title, a tradition continued in *Younger Titurel* (Brewer, 2015: 22). Meanwhile, the King David story that began to circulate around the time of the Fifth Crusade also tried to preserve the legend by turning its hero into a title. Jacques de Vitry's "Second Letter from Acre" (1217) discusses the "Christians of the land of Prester John" as likely allies in the fight against Islam, yet when it comes to

⁷³ John Selden, *Titles of Honor* (1614); Petrus Jarricus, *Thesaurum rerum indicarum* (1615); Jerónimo Lobo, *A Short Relation of the River Nile* (1669); Dominique Bouhours, *The Life of St. Ignatius* (1686)

⁷⁴ For a history of the use of Prester John's original title as a kind of "king of kings," see Sheir (2022: 181–182).

identifying this Prester John, Jacques introduces another name: King David. Either the son or grandson of Prester John, this figure was nonetheless himself “commonly called Prester John” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 99). Prester John here becomes less an official title than an informal moniker attached to a line of mysterious Eastern kings.

Although written 150 years after the first two texts to disembody Prester John, John of Hildesheim’s *Historia trium regum* (c. 1375) also turns Prester John into an inheritable title. This text provided a backstory to better explain Otto of Freising’s mid twelfth-century connection between the biblical magi and Prester John. Hildesheim notes that Indian Christians are governed by a “patryarke Thomas” though above him sits a ruler styled in the *rex et sacerdos* model Hildesheim uses the Magi to establish. Since “there is no degree so hygh as preesthode” and “in worship of saynt Johan theuangelyst [the evangelist]” Hildesheim concludes that “this lorde sholde not be called a kynge or emperour, but he sholde be called Preter Johan” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015, 209). It is no coincidence that several writers that follow in this section mention something of this fact, including Philippe Avril, one of the first writers to identify Prester John with the Dalai Lama.

The Etymology of a Title

The metamorphosis of Prester John from a mortal king into an inherited title led the legend’s skeptics to a variety of conclusions. Such skeptics frequently blamed the mission of Pêro da Covilhã for a linguistic error that led a host of later missionaries to misidentify several Ethiopian *negasti* as Prester John. Over two centuries, a dozen other writers speculated on the linguistic and etymological roots of such an association in accounts that were as creative as they were convoluted.

Manoel de Almeida’s unpublished *The History of High Ethiopia or Abassia* (1628–1646) begins with a chapter called “The Name Prester John,” which inaugurates the inaccurate claim that Covilhã was the first to wrongfully associate Prester John with the Ethiopian sovereign. According to Almeida, the name Prester John was initially given to a Nestorian Christian ruler located in the interior of Asia. This man was so called because he always carried a cross and because his actual title, *Jonanam* (from the prophet Jonah), sounded like *John* (Silverberg, 1972: 320). Almeida’s unpublished text was not in itself influential, but the inclusion of this account in Balthazar Téllez’s *Travels of the Jesuits in Ethiopia* (1660) rendered it authoritative. For Téllez, the Ethiopian kingdom of “vulgarly call’d Prester John’s country” was written about “so variously, and with such unintelligible confusion” that it created a “Gordian

knot” that scholars must attempt to untie (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 241). Téllez attests that no Jesuit travelers to Ethiopia, men who have now traversed the country “End to End,” had encountered a man who recognized the name or title. Téllez blames Covilhã for perpetuating the misunderstanding that Prester John was in Africa. When this news reached Portugal in his letters and in subsequent accounts such as Francisco Álvares’ tract, Covilhã’s attribution was accepted, as “pleasing News is rather believ’d than examin’d” (Brewer, 2015: 241). Others, including Jerónimo Lobo, championed Pedro Paez’s argument in his *History of Ethiopia* (1620) that Covilhã’s mistake was to misunderstand “John” as “zan,” a traditional signifier of leadership positions in Ethiopia.⁷⁵

Another group of skeptics omit the scapegoat Covilhã but still pursued linguistic explanations of this misidentification, likewise concluding that Prester John was in fact a long-dead Asian monarch. In the anonymous *Embassy of David, King of Ethiopia* (1533), it is suggested that the Ethiopian *negus* “is not called by them Prester John (as the masses falsely believe) but *Gyam*, which in their language means ‘powerful’ for he is in truth most powerful” (qtd. in Silverberg, 1972: 318). For Damião de Góis (1540), who had consulted with Saga Za Ab, an Ethiopian ambassador who traveled back to Portugal with Francisco Álvares in 1527, the correct title was “Pretiosus Iohannes” roughly derived from the Ge’ez title “Jan Belul,” *belul* meaning precious or exalted (Silverberg, 1972: 320). A number of subsequent writers found this to be the authoritative etymological accounting.⁷⁶ Manoel de Almeida, however, claimed that Saga Za Ab had purposefully misinformed Damião, only telling the patriotic philosopher what he wanted to hear (Silverberg, 1972: 320).

Later writers, often without consulting any new or independent sources, offer other explanations. Peter Heylyn (1652) tries to prove that Prester John was a minor Asian ruler by working convolutedly through the linguistics of the corrupted translation that turned Marco Polo’s Nestorian shepherd into Prester John. For Philippe Avril (1693), Prester John was a “corruption of Preste-Arkan, that is to say, the king of Adorers” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 255). The Benedictine monk and Hebraist Pierre Guarin reasons in his *Chaldaica Grammatica* (1726) that the correct title, “Prester Cohan,” reflects the Hebrew and Syriac words for “priest,” while his location in southern India – which Guarin places in Africa – means Prester Cohan’s subjects could be rightly called both “Indians” and

⁷⁵ Other texts that blame Covilhã include Hiob Ludolf’s *History of Ethiopia* (1681), Dominique Bouhours, *The Life of St. Francis* (1686), and the anonymous *The Beauties of Nature and Art Displayed* (1763–1764).

⁷⁶ Cf. Leo Africanus, *Description of Africa* (1550); Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, *Itinerario* (c. 1598); and John Selden, *Titles of Honor* (1614).

“Abyssinians” (Brewer, 2015: 296). For James Bruce (1790), it was the call “Rete O Jan hoi!, which, repeated quick, very much resembles Prete Gianni” (Brewer, 2015: 298).

As with most of the legend’s narrative paths, the accounts of a misheard title end in much the same way they begin. Visiting Ethiopia in 1752, nearly 400 years after Europeans began visiting Ethiopia to seek Prester John, Remedius Prutký inquired about the association between the Ethiopian *negus* and Prester John, an idea still clearly circulating within Europe. Prutký claims in his *Travels* that the 28-year-old Emperor Iyasu II (r. 1730–1755) “was astonished” and claimed that “kings of Abyssinia had never been accustomed to call themselves by this name” (Brewer, 2015: 264). Prester John had still not yet been found.

The Road to Tibet

Beginning in the seventeenth century, writers who we might call the “late optimists” reasoned that if Prester John was not in Ethiopia, he may still be found elsewhere. Although Prester John had become a title, it was now clear that this title had never been properly understood; such writers deemed it then reasonable to return to “Greater India,” from where it was now agreed Prester John had come, and to seek other titled priest-kings. This search resulted, for some, in the identification of Tibet and the Dalai Lama as plausible avatars of Prester John and his kingdom.

Unsurprisingly, one of the earliest medieval mentions of Tibet can be found in a text that also treated the Prester John legend. Benjamin of Tudela (c. 1130–1174), who had recorded a story like that related in Otto of Freising’s chronicle, avers in that same text that Tibet, part of the wider Persian empire and the source of the world’s musk, could be found by journeying four days west from Samarkand, a landmark in the *LOPJ* (Adler, 1907: 82, 151). Less than a century later, John of Plano Carpini (c. 1185–1252) refers to the land as “Burithabet”; William of Rubruck (c. 1220–1293) calls it “Tebec” (Dawson, 1980: 23, 142). Both authors claim that the inhabitants of this land are cannibals (Dawson, 1980: 23, 142). The *Elyseus Narrative*, one of the earliest Prester John narratives, attests that the terrestrial paradise could be found on the top of four mountains in India. It is to the Himalayas that a new generation of travelers began to imagine a community of Christians.

The first writer to explicitly locate Prester John in Tibet was Johannes Nieuhof (1618–1672), a Dutch traveler and member of the East India Company, marking a new era in the mercantile pursuit of Prester John. Nieuhof’s travels in China, recorded in *Embassy from the East-India Company* (1673), lead him to a discussion of the origin of the Prester John legend, which he situates in greater

Asia but concedes that “in what Place he Rul’d, is not exactly known” (Nieuhof, 1669: 342, *EEBO*). He reasons that the title Prester John, however transliterated, could not apply to a Chinese ruler but could refer to a sovereign located beyond the great desert, “conterminat on the North and West unto the Empire of China” (p. 342). Citing his source as “the Arabick geographer,” he then postulates that upon a mountain distinguished by “such craggy and difficult sides, that none can ascend it” lies the kingdom of Prester John (p. 342). Given his association of this land with Gog and Magog, Nieuhof appears to imagine Tibet in the mold of the terrestrial paradise, the place the *Elyseus Narrative* had located atop four giant mountains in “Greater India.” Nieuhof surmises that, driven by fear, an ancient Christian community must have found a way up the mountains after fleeing the persecution of Roman emperors.

While Nieuhof’s account of a Tibetan Prester John relies on idiosyncratic logic, he was not the first to imagine such an identification. A few years earlier, the Dutch minister and schoolmaster Arnold Montanus, relying on intelligence from the East India Company, identified Prester John’s kingdom somewhat more ambiguously as west of Sichuan in his *Atlas Chinesis* (1671). A few years before that, the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher’s *China Illustrata* (1667) situated Prester John in the kingdom of “Tanchut,” a province proximal to Tibet. The Portuguese humanist historian and poet Manuel de Faria e Sousa (1590–1649) identifies Prester John with Ethiopia but later asserts in his *Asia Portuguesa* (1667) that the priest-king may hail from Tibet.

Though the association between Prester John and Tibet was gradual, these texts illustrate that there were a variety of entry points: the East India Company, Portuguese humanism, and the continued missionary activity of the Jesuits and Capuchins.⁷⁷ The most pronounced influence came from the last of these. Jesuits and Capuchins arrived in Tibet within two years of each other (1721, 1719), and a chapel was built and presided over by the latter, beginning in 1726. Yet there had already been rumors circulating among the Jesuits that Christians were to be found in Tibet. Very few of these travelers wrote of Prester John explicitly, however. Among those Jesuits who did was the aforementioned Philippe Avril, a French professor-turned-traveler dispatched to China who, like fellow missionary Jordanus of Sévérac, never reached his destination. In fact, Avril failed to reach his destination three separate times. Nonetheless, and like Jordanus, his journey brought to his mind a new home for Prester John. His account, though seemingly aberrant when first encountered, makes sense as the culmination of a slowly building new home for the title of Prester John.

⁷⁷ Torri (2023) argues that contemporary Buddhist notions of a similar parlance to the Prester John legend, including motifs of “secret valleys” and “hidden lands,” may have helped facilitate a connection between Tibet and Prester John.

Before further embellishing the association between Prester John and Tibet, Avril reviews the claims of Damião de Góis, Nicolão Godinho, and Balthazar Téllez. In his *Travels into Diverse Parts of Europe and Asia* (1692), Avril flatly affirms, “the Dalaè-lama is without all contradiction that same Famous Preste-Jean” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 254). He further concludes, “In a word, since that Title, and whatever many Authors have said of him, can be attributed to no Person more justly then to this Dalae-Iama, ’tis more natural to acknowledge him in this Country of Asia, where he has always been, then [*sic*] to seek him out in Habyssinia [Ethiopia], where he never was” (p. 254). Although Avril gives the appearance that such intelligence gleaned was from his travels, which never approached Tibet, his reasoning is firmly grounded in the conversations about Prester John’s title and name that this section has already discussed. After making his pronouncement, Avril recapitulates the linguistic ideas from Covilhã through a half dozen other theories and concludes that the Dalai Lama was the only logical attribution. While this Prester John rules in a diminished role, Avril reassures “[h]owever it were, he is still in high veneration among all the Eastern people, who acknowledge him for the Head of their Religion” (p. 254). At the end of his treatment of the legend, Avril augments his Tibetan Prester John argument with one culminating linguistic link recalling a key feature of Prester John iconography: “And that which is farther remarkable is this, that he bears the Name of Lama, which in the Tartar Language signifies a Cross” (p. 254).

This identification did not die with Avril after his shipwreck in 1698. That very year, the Royal Society fellow and writer Jodocus Crull (1660–1713) favorably repeated Avril’s argument in *The Antient and Present State of Muscovy*. The English clergyman Thomas Broughton (1704–1774) simply tells his reader to “see Dalai-Lama” under the “Prester John” heading within his *Historical Dictionary of All Religions* (1742).

Finally, in the German geographer Johann Gottlieb Georgi’s *Russia* (1780), this narrative loop is closed. Writing 100 years after Avril, Georgi, who spent much of his life traveling through Siberia and Russia, once more reviews the linguistic history of Prester John’s title. From this he reasons, “[n]ow, if we can admit that the missionaries of the Nestorians came into these countries . . . then the Nestorian patriarch and Prester John are one person . . . according to the rules of etymology” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 268). Georgi also links Prester John to the Dalai Lama, whom he correctly locates at the Potala palace in Lhasa; he even provides approximate geographic coordinates. At the end of his discussion, he brings the Prester John of Otto of Freising together with that of Philippe Avril: “In the pursuit of these enquiries we shall find this Prester John, or this Nestorian Catholicus, to be likewise one and the same with the Dalai Lama” (p. 268). From the twelfth to the eighteenth century, travelers and writers

continued to shrink the unknown world using the legend of Prester John to collapse diverse cultures and personages into the familiar figure of Prester John.

Conclusion

The purpose of this overview of the narrative paths the Prester John legend forged has been to establish four things: the peerless longevity of this legend, the wide and transcultural influence Prester John had on global communication, the geographic and ideological malleability he possessed to acquire this influence, and the elastic return of each narrative to the legend's foundational themes. For these reasons, Prester John stands as one of the most impactful imaginary figures of the last two millennia. Over the course of the legend, writers partially patterned their fantasies about Prester John on the traits or resonances of other legendary figures of the medieval and early modern eras – Alexander, Arthur, Tamerlane. However, what distinguishes Prester John from these transcultural warrior figures is the possibility of a global Christendom that Prester John comes to represent.

And yet, despite nine centuries of continuously inventive and materially impactful Prester John lore, this figure has largely disappeared from contemporary scholarship on the world historical themes in which he played an instrumental rhetorical role: trade, holy war, utopia, colonialism. For the most part, Prester John has been completely written out of modern history textbooks.⁷⁸

It is not difficult to imagine possible explanations for this omission. The longevity and reach of the legend make it impossible to confine its discussion to a single region, theme, or historical period. The Prester John legend resists the clean chronologies of history textbooks, given its continuance across what are commonly understood as discrete medieval, early modern, and Enlightenment periods. A bit more philosophically, the legend of Prester John challenges the substance upon which history can even be made: rumor, rhetoric, hope. It is even somewhat embarrassing to accept the influence that this imaginary figure had on understandings of world geography, European cartography, religious conflict, and early colonialism, among other academic specialties. Nonetheless, the truth remains. It is not even possible to contend that Prester John's influence had been exhausted by the "modern" period, however defined. If we look carefully, we can see the small ways in which Prester John's legacy can be felt globally today.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Cf. Brooks (2014: appendix M), p. 316.

⁷⁹ Since 2003, the Instituto de Preste João in Portugal has served as the Royal and Imperial Council of Foreign Nobility and liaison with Ethiopia. The surname Prettejohn is not uncommon in England (Beckingham, 1996: 24). A statue of Prester John graces Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

This Element is meant to be but an introduction and expandable guide to the Prester John legend's main tentacles. The Crusader path demonstrates how the fanciful *LOPJ* led to sincere expectations concerning Prester John's arrival and the military aid he might provide. The Mongol path indicates how even after Prester John and his army failed to deliver that aid, diplomatic excursions across the Asian Steppe continued to understand the world they encountered around the fulcrum of an already known, now-dead Christian heretic understood as Prester John. The legend survives this death in the African narrative path, in which Prester John reemerges into the more durable title of a biblically affiliated dynasty whose existence merged the desires for a Christian military and mercantile ally, and which instead of ushering in an era of Christian universalism helped justify the murder and exploitation of Indigenous peoples under the guise of missionary ardor and economic gain. Meanwhile, the pop history path helped preserve an ideologically inflected understanding of geography that helped perpetuate Christian universalism as a globally shared eschatological horizon. The literary path then offers a framework within which Prester John could survive, in some of Europe's most canonical narrative realms, and thus continue to impact expectations of what the wider world looked like. Finally, the etymological path reveals the extent to which early humanists would tie themselves into philological knots to explain how the legend of Prester John could remain relevant in a world self-understood as rational, empirical, and globally connected.

One limitation of this approach is the lack of clear space for some of the legend's more unique, surprising narrative turns, especially those of the last 300 years. As made evident by the stories connecting Prester John to the Dalai Lama, the Prester John legend was not only malleable but also neatly exportable to other cultures and contexts on the epistemological edge of current European geographical understanding. Despite what we may want to believe about our modernity, these reprisals of Prester John continued into the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. One such example that did not fit a path below is the adaptation of the Prester John by Russia's "Old Believers." Beginning in the mid seventeenth century, a group of Russian Christians, so-called "Old Believers" due to their objections concerning their church's unification with Greek Orthodoxy, began to generate myths of a kind of earthly paradise (Byelividiye) in which peasants could live peaceful lives undisturbed of state intrusions into religious practice. This paradise was traditionally located on an island at the eastern edge of the Earth, which

Twenty-first-century explorers have continued to search the Asian Steppe for vestigial clues that might support the reality of this imaginary kingdom (Wyld, 2000; Jubber 2005).

became associated with Japan, and was overseen by an Assyrian (once called “Nestorian”) patriarch. Given the *LOPJ*’s early circulation within Russia – perhaps as early as the twelfth century – combined with the reference to Assyrian/Nestorian Christianity along with the historical conflation in Russia of India and Japan (Manning, 1922: 290), the resonances with the Prester John legend become clear. Into the nineteenth century, some of these “Old Believers” famously wandered north and east seeking this mythical kingdom.

Not only does this adaptation of the legend testify to Prester John’s global reach into modernity; it also neatly parallels the earliest iterations of the legend, in which the utopic kingdom of Prester John circulates along the horizon of Europe’s *ecumene*. This is to say that despite its absence from most modern world histories, Prester John continued to inform geographic fantasies well into the modern era. In a coda that follows this brief conclusion, I return to one final world historical theme – race – and two twentieth-century texts: John Buchan’s *Prester John* and Marvel Comics’ Prester John. These more contemporary reprisals of Prester John vary in their treatment and use of the legend and collectively attest to an abiding interest in a figure whose many accounts still leave him unknowable.

Coda: Prester John, Race, and the Twenty-First Century

To discuss Prester John’s race will certainly appear anachronistic to some – those who insist on its cultural reliance on the terms “white” and “slave,” along with the history of the American colonies – and absurd to others – who might point out that frivolously discussing the race of an imaginary figure undermines the stakes of racial discourse in the modern period. Yet, as a figure who crossed into modernity, however defined, and one whose visual appearance functioned to gauge virtue and in- vs. out-group membership, Prester John well represents the “genealogical idiom” (Bartlett, 2001: 44) by which medieval and early modern scholars have effected a longer history of race.⁸⁰ Although the word “race” was not commonly used until the 1600s, Ramey (2016: 26) reminds us of the degree to which meaning is produced outside of etymology, which helps us find ideological continuity in a time when women, Jews, Muslims, and people of hybrid ethnicities had their humanity questioned in the juridical-theological tradition that, over time, transformed into so-called race science. For the purposes of this Element, race will be understood as the assessment of visual features (skin color, religious identification, class markers) by which a person

⁸⁰ For approaches to medieval and early modern race similar to that of this Element, see also Cohen (2013); Ramey (2016); Campbell (2016); Heng (2018).

was sorted, through a process of group identification, within a cultural hierarchy that privileged similarity over difference.

Prester John in Black and White

By the definition just given, Prester John's racial identity is complicated. On the one hand, he has been rendered to appear as everything from an Anglo European to a Southeast Asian to a black African to a white Ethiopian. On the other hand, fewer than one-fifth of Prester John narratives mention Prester John's appearance, let alone his perceived race. When assessing these depictions chronologically, no obvious patterns emerge. To further complicate matters, the question of Prester John's race cannot be completely divorced from his purported function. The idea of Prester John, like the medieval concept of race itself, is a cultural production that, following Heng, "selectively essentializes" perceived cultural differences to manage the larger project of human difference (Heng, 2018: 27). Insofar as race "is a response to ambiguity," as Heng proposes, Prester John's racial identity warrants analysis even as it remains amorphous.

In other words, it is challenging to disentangle the priest-king's racial identity from the sense of sameness or difference he represented to those who imagined him: a messianic white hero portending a universal Christendom, a powerful black warrior-heretic ripe for potential conversion, the exotic Indian ruler who oversees a potential trove of undiscovered riches, a faceless gesture toward a utopic otherworld, or, as we shall see, a dangerous African rebel attempting to overthrow European colonial rule. What can be clearly concluded is that Prester John's imagined race both influenced and was influenced by the ideological commitments of the legend's writers, even as Prester John lacked any stable racial referents within and across narrative paths.

The evidence concerning Prester John's racial makeup focuses on skin color, which is a component for medieval and early modern racial thinking but was not necessarily itself racially determinative (Snowden, 1983: 63–86; Stoler, 1997; Patton, 2015). His racial identity is, at the end of the day, unsettled. Another, more provocative way of framing the discussion is to suggest that Prester John is transracial, or contextually raced. It would be irresponsible to speculate upon what this means for larger medieval and early modern conversations about race, but such malleability does suggest something mutable and therefore extra-biological about medieval and early modern racial identity.

It is useful to begin by identifying the parts of Prester John's biography that helped writers imagine his race. Foremost among these is John's descendancy from the Magi who, in addition to hailing from separate places themselves, are

racialized variously in extrabiblical narratives (Sim, 1999).⁸¹ Another key feature of Prester John's identity is his adherence to non-doctrinal Christianity, usually as a so-called Nestorian Christian. In Prester John narratives, Nestorians are commonly identified as a "people," but the persistent medieval association between this Christian practice and Islam testifies to the degree to which, in Heng's words, such writers participated in the practice of "racing Nestorian Christians" (Heng, 2018: 316).⁸² Heng argues that "heretical Christians" in general, and Assyrian (Nestorian) Christians in particular, should be considered a kind of "virtual race" in the Middle Ages due to the way they were institutionally "set apart by absolute and fundamental differences" from Catholicism (pp. 316–323). The racial overtones of Nestorianism forced some writers to drop this association with Prester John to maintain the figure's racial mutability. *Historia trium regum* (c. 1375), for example, links only Jaspar, one of the Magi, to Nestorianism, condemning his "Nestorini" people as "the worst and the cursedest heretykes of the worlde, and for the moost parte they ben blacke ethyopyes" (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 209). In this example, the descriptors "Nestorini," "heretykes," "blacke," and "ethyopes" serve as out-groups for the writer and, when compounded, present the prejudicial visual spectacle of Prester John's antithesis. John of Hildesheim's Prester John, on the other hand, is neither Nestorian heretic nor black Ethiopian, and such a description of Jaspar's progeny may serve to capture and set aside the Prester John associations Hildesheim wished to ignore in his own vision of the priest-king. For Hildesheim, these Nestorians "forsoke" Prester John. Prester John here remains unraced, which, put another way, maintains his racial availability.

Other early associations presented more specific versions of Prester John. In *Parzival*, he is the son of the bicultural Feirefiz, whose racial inheritance is manifest in his mottled black and white skin. Meanwhile, in the same decade, the prophesied arrival of a Christian savior during the Fifth Crusade, premised on deeds by Chinese and Mongol warriors, was represented as some nearer-west bearer of the familiar biblical names of John and David.

Not surprisingly, it is in the Ethiopian Prester John path that the writers truly begin to attend to Prester John's imagined or reported appearance. In the early years of Prester John's imagined residence in Africa, two key features were

⁸¹ In *Otto of Freising's chronicle*, the first text to establish the connection between Prester John and the Magi, the priest-king was described as hailing from "*de antiqua progenie*" of those biblical kings.

⁸² The racial impulse by which Latin Christendom separated itself from other Christian denominations can be observed in the actions of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 that focused on heresy and the identifying of Jews and Muslims with separate dress. Such thinking can be observed as late as 1877, when Edward Cutts described Nestorianism as a race unto itself in his report on Assyrian Christianity in Kurdistan (Cutts, 1877: 13).

commonly mentioned: his blackness and a close relationship with the Cross. This understanding of an African Christian king predates Prester John's association with Ethiopia. Before Prester John's name resurfaced at the time of the Fifth Crusade, the crusader and chronicler Robert of Clari (c. 1216) described the arrival in Constantinople of a Nubian king, a black man with "a cross in the middle of his forehead that had been made with a hot iron" (Clari, 2005: 79), an image repeated by Marco Polo (qtd. in Silverberg, 1972: 131) and Samuel Purchas (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 236), among other authors of Prester John narratives. Friar Jordanus' *Mirabilia* (1340) does not describe Prester John himself but identifies the people of the empire of "Abdeselib" over which he reigns as black "as to their skins" and states that these people "burn the sign of the cross with fire in recognition of baptism" (qtd. in Silverberg, 1972: 168). This insistence on an embodied Christianity strengthens the in-group ties of these black Africans, who, as potential allies, are generally described positively. Jordanus adds, for instance, that these black Ethiopians and Nubians are "still men of intelligence with good brains, and they have understanding and knowledge" (p. 168). A similar sentiment is echoed in *The Book of Knowledge of All Kingdoms*, in which the presumably fictional traveler-narrator states that Prester John's subjects are "black as pitch" and "are men of good understanding, and good mind" (Marino, 1999: 60–61). John of Marignolli (1330) distinguishes Prester John's Ethiopia only in that it is inhabited by black people. Mandeville's Ethiopians, inhabitants of the Torrid Zone, were black and lived shorter lives due to the climate. Jacob of Verona too mentions the "black Ethiopians" (qtd. in Salvatore, 2016: 5). On Carignano's map they are "Christiani negri."

Later in the Prester John as African monarch path, Prester John's skin color becomes considered more carefully to establish in-group ties with the writers. Bertrandon de la Broquière (1457) tells a secondhand story of a man who claims to have been married in the Ethiopian kingdom of Prester John, a land peopled with Christians "neither white or black . . . but yellow-brown" (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 214). In Francisco Álvares' account (1540) of his time in Ethiopia (1520–1526), Emperor Lebna Dengel, understood to be Prester John, is "a young man, not very black" with a complexion he describes as "chestnut and bay," which is again emphasized as a "not very dark color" (qtd. in Silverberg, 1972: 248).

As news from Portuguese missionaries searching for Prester John returned to Europe, the Ethiopian Prester John began to more and more resemble the writers who imagined him. As early as 1499, Giuliano Dati's *The Great Magnificence of Prester John*, categorized above as a literary text, was also published with a frontispiece depicting a white European Prester John. Johann Boemus' encyclopedic ethnography *Omnium gentium mores, leges, et ritus* (1520) and its 1555 English retelling, *Fardle of Facions*, both further Europeanize Prester

John, stating, in the narrative of the latter, that he was “not as the moste of the Ethiopians are, blacke, but white” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 287). Francisco Álvares’ publisher Luis Rodrigues also diminishes Prester John’s blackness, depicting him on this frontispiece (1540) as a white, European-looking bearded man dressed in armor atop a horse. These examples of whitewashing Prester John did not necessarily impact Europe’s larger view of Ethiopia and its inhabitants. In 1557, for example, the Spanish Jesuit missionary and future Latin Patriarch of Ethiopia André de Oviedo affirmed that Lebna Dengel’s son and successor Galawdewos was “a broad black man” (qtd. in Silverberg, 1972: 303). But on the Mercator maps that featured Prester John (1569, 1628) the African king Prester John looked no different than the king of France.

As the linguists began to disentangle the title of Prester John away from the sovereignty of Ethiopia, those who continued to insist on his African residence returned to portrayals of the priest-king as a black man. Representative of this transition was a map contained in Peter Heylyn’s *Cosmographie* (1652). Although its creator Nicolas Visscher had returned Prester John to Asia, he featured the king of Abyssinia in the upper-left border of his *New, Plaine, and Exact Map of Africa* (1652) as a young black man wearing a European-style crown. For Remedius Prutký, the very title Prester John is etymologically linked to the blackness of his people. He argues (1752) that the title “Prete Ianni” is a corruption of “preto,” the Portuguese word for black (Brewer, 2015: 265). Proposing a similar etymological error, Jerónimo Lobo analogizes that the Europeans understood Ethiopian kings as Prester John in a similar manner to Muslims who came to use the term “Franks” to refer to “all white men” (Brewer, 2015: 247). For Voltaire (1756), Prester John had become fully out-grouped as “that black prince who is half schismatic Christian and half Jew” (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 266). At the end of the eighteenth century, James Bruce reduces a no longer useful Prester John to black chieftain of a primitive land.

On closer inspection, the outlines of a larger pattern come into view. A strictly chronological accounting of racial descriptors in Prester John narratives suggests that Prester John’s race was grounded entirely in a writer’s contextualized expectations for his function, but if we look at these depictions within each narrative path, there is a tendency for Prester John to become “whiter” and more “European” over time. Put another way, at the highest points of enthusiasm for a given narrative path, that is, the beginnings, it was exceedingly rare for writers to describe or depict Prester John as white or European in bearing, even if they focus on the in-group status of his Christianity. The Europeanizing of Prester John tends to coincide with points where belief in that version of Prester John begins to diminish. Although there do not exist enough racialized descriptions of Prester John to stake any definitive claims, a brief survey of his racial history

across narrative paths aligns with a mutability that echoes findings of scholarship on medieval race.

Space does not here afford a full treatment of the races of Prester John and the ideologies that underpin that discussion, but I want to end on a brief discussion of two texts, both from the twentieth century, that feature Prester John and use his race, I would argue, to make specific arguments about the legend and what this fictional priest-king represents for modernity.

Prester John in Color

The first of these two texts is a 1910 novel called *Prester John*, written by the Scottish novelist, historian, and politician John Buchan. This purported adventure story for boys tells the tale of Reverend John Laputa, a South African (here called “Kaffir”) man who styles himself a new Prester John and attempts to unite South Africa against British imperialism. This was the first of Buchan’s books to gain wide popularity and was made into a silent film in 1920, shot and produced in South Africa.

The book opens on the Scottish seaside with the main character David Crawfurd as a boy observing a strange midnight ritual led by the town’s eloquent black minister, the Reverend John Laputa. After his father’s passing, Crawfurd moves to South Africa to take up a shopkeeping post outside of a Zulu village in South Africa. On the voyage over, Crawfurd notices that same Reverend from his childhood and observes him conversing most nefariously with a Portuguese man of suspicious repute.

Once arrived and settled, Crawfurd feels uneasy in the arid plains of South Africa. As time passes, he finds himself on the inside of the illegal diamond trade. What’s more, he comes to learn that the Reverend who seems to be “haunting” him is, in fact, the leader of a proposed uprising of the Zulu and Swazi peoples, and thus the central figure in an attempt to retake Africa from British imperial power. Reverend John has proven to be a leader who has garnered both sacred and secular authority from the local South African tribes. We learn that this Reverend also calls himself Prester John – who is speculated upon by Blaauwildebeestefontein’s European schoolmaster Mr. Wardlaw as “a sort of Christian, but I expect that his practices were as pagan as his neighbours” (Buchan, 1910: 87).

An “adventure” unfolds in which David Crawfurd helps a seasoned British military officer capture Reverend Laputa and the ruby necklet that is the source of the priest-king’s power. An elegant physical symbol of the legend’s charisma, this necklet is first stolen by the conspicuously unlikeable Portuguese Henrique, stolen back by Laputa, and then finally recaptured and squandered in a ravine by the novel’s young Scottish hero. Separated from this necklet,

Prester John is rendered useless. Faced with the imminent arrival of colonial authorities, the anti-colonialist leader leaps to his presumed death into an underground river chasm. His final words, as Uebel records, are “my race is doomed” (Uebel, 2001: 276; Buchan, 1910: 218). Buchan’s colonialist vantage, echoed in his antagonist’s demise, frames the possibility of African independence as dependent on magic and marvel, some trick required to overcome a perceived racial disadvantage. “If he had been born white, he might have been a second Napoleon,” the Colonial Army Captain James Arcoll muses (Buchan, 1910: 88).

In Buchan’s *Prester John*, the once-fabled medieval priest-king who promised a Christian unification of the globe becomes the anti-colonialist villain in an adventure story for boys. Buchan seemed to think he found Prester John not as a figure to usher in a Christian universalism but as a specter portending a postcolonial future. While that medieval promise of universal Christendom depended on a hopeful reconciliation with the fluidity of cultural difference so central to the myth as depicted in the *LOPJ*, the structural failure of Buchan’s Prester John seems to assert that, in an imperial modernity, cultural – here rendered racial – identity proves rigid and inflexible, and that the act of *translatio* across boundaries that was so essential to the *LOPJ*’s early transmission, in this twentieth-century context, becomes impossible.

Prester John as Superhero

Prester John resurfaces in the 1960s, during which he became a character in the ever-popular Marvel comic book series, a narrative universe that now boasts the highest-grossing film franchise of all time, having generated nearly 30 billion dollars globally. In an issue of *The Fantastic Four* (1966), the gang visits the Black Panther, introduced as “the hereditary chieftain of the mighty Wakandas . . . whose wealth is virtually beyond calculation” (Lee, 1966: 4). While touring Wakanda, Johnny Storm – alias “The Human Torch” – expresses his melancholy to friend Wyatt Wingfoot about having lost his girlfriend Crystal to an impossible-to-reach area of Earth known as the “Hidden Land.” Lucky for Johnny, the ever-hospitable Black Panther lends the heroes a futuristic all-terrain vehicle capable of transporting them to that otherwise unreachable place. On the way, the domed vehicle becomes trapped in quicksand, releasing the duo into a cave-like chasm where they stumble upon none other than Prester John, asleep on a throne. Having been identified in nearly every corner of the globe by the 1960s, the comic introduces its newest superhero in one of the few places where he had not yet been sought:

underground. But just as Prester John begins to narrate his backstory, the action of the issue resumes and the reader is left with no further information.

Nearly a decade later, Prester John is reintroduced when Marvel mainstays The Thing and Iron Man accidentally launch themselves deep into the ground (Mantlo, 1975). Once again, Marvel heroes encounter Prester John in his underground kingdom. Looking closely at the issue's inaugural visual presentation of Prester John, one can see that the priest-king is depicted holding the very ruby necklet that sources his charisma and power in John Buchan's 1910 novel (Mantlo, 1975: 11). Upon this observation, the priest-king's underground kingdom accretes another layer of significance. As mentioned, Buchan's novel ends with the Reverend John jumping to his presumed death into a cave. And yet, here, in 1975, these two Marvel superheroes find Prester John alive and well, hundreds of feet underground, equipped with his "power stone," no worse for the wear. Only one thing has changed: Prester John transforms from a black man dressed in traditional Zulu clothing into a red-headed Anglo man dressed like he had just returned from a crusade.

Returning to the history he began in the 1966 comic, this Prester John relates that he was indeed a crusader-knight, protector of Richard I "the lion-hearted," folk-hero of the Third Crusade. What's more, Prester John is also the self-described "son of Avalon," where he was frozen, much like the mythical English King Arthur, a "hidden king," here positioned on a futuristic device called the "seat of survival" designed by the alchemists of Avalon, in which he can remain in suspended animation until his services are once again needed (Mantlo, 1975: 14–15).

But *whom* does Prester John serve? What these texts make clear is that Prester John serves no man or woman. Prester John has since been featured in 19 separate Marvel titles and more than 100 issues from 1966 to 2010, and in none of these does he make a formal alliance with another character or betray obedience or allegiance to a larger force. The self-described "master of all" and "creation and the power in the universe" (Mantlo, 1975: 22) remains alive, but dormant, most recently appearing in 2010. Perhaps the more abiding question then is *where* does Prester John serve? As these twenty-first-century narratives validate, Prester John continued to inhabit the frontiers of a cultural imagination attempting to domesticate the wildness of the world within the mythological frameworks that had helped create the desire for the very concept of wildness. But fitting the pattern established in earlier narrative paths, Prester John has transformed from a black man into a white one to do so.

Waiting for Prester John

Even if the legend has been written out of history books, Prester John remains alive in popular culture, whether we knew he was there or not. These two texts provide a final example of the narrative actions of malleability and elasticity so central to understanding the longevity of the Prester John legend. Prester John maintained this narrative flexibility despite the legend's continual, elastic return to one or more of the foundational themes established during the medieval genesis of the legend: Latin Christendom's perceived need for external assistance against foreign threats, the receipt of a future-directed pledge of military aid, the attempts to enclose ideological threats within a Christian framework, and the desire for the unknown parts of the world to be revealed as an extension of what was already familiar.

Long confined to the periphery of medieval studies – not quite a literary figure, not quite a historical personage or theological event – a wider narrative history of the legend of Prester John reveals the degree to which this eminently mutable signifier figured quite centrally in the project of European modernity and, with it, a globally interconnected understanding of culture and identity. The legend's medieval European intellectual framework not only influenced Europe's movement into a so-called globalized modernity but also survived within those modern structures the legend helped influence. Whether one marks Europe's entry into the modern world by the facilitation of global trade networks, the project of colonialism, the cultural emergence of racial discourse, the movement away from Aristotle and natural philosophy toward scientific empiricism due to a newfound access to lost texts, or the rise of the nation-state out of a vision of sovereignty, Prester John was there: on maps and frontispieces, a point of translinguistic contact, connecting an old world with a new one, a rhetorical model, scribbled in the margins, dog-eared and dreamed of.

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Acknowledgments

I wish to first acknowledge the work of all previous Prester John scholars, whose careful documentation and perspicacious analysis of the legend allowed me to put my own understanding together, piece by piece, over the course of a decade. I wish also to thank Marianna Ferrara and the presenters at the 2023 conference “Retelling Prester John: Frontiers, Routes, and Emotions of a Failed Encounter” held at Sapienza University of Rome for reminding me of the cross-disciplinary impact of this enduring legend. Thank you also to Geraldine Heng for inspiring me to create the International Prester John Project and for supporting its expansion into this Element. Thank you to John DeStafney and the two anonymous reviewers for your generous and incisive feedback.

The Global Middle Ages

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