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The Quest for Prester John

ANDREW BLAKE DENTON
ATHENS STATE UNIVERSITY

The Quest for Prester John explores the origin of the myth of the Eastern Christian potentate “Prester John” and follows the nearly five century search of one of history’s most sought after apparitions from the popular craze inaugurated by the circulation of the mysterious Letter of Prester John in the 12th century to the fruitless conclusion in the Horn of Africa in the 17th century. The social and political impact on Medieval Europe is examined as well as the diplomatic blunders with the rulers of the Golden Horde and Ethiopia caused by the false hopes and assumptions. A rich (and often conflicting) variety of historical documents are consulted from The Travels of Marco Polo to Prester John of the Indies: A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John being the narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520.

The legend of Prester John is one of the most fascinating and powerful myths of all time. To say that Medieval Europeans knew little about the world outside of their native continent is truly an understatement. It was an age in which much was assumed rather than ascertained about the exotic lands beyond. For most of the Dark Ages, Europeans were constrained to their native soil, with very few chances to explore or make direct contact with the outside world, the most notable exception being the Pax Mongolica. This was not by their own volition, but rather out of compulsion. The North African and Arab spice trade monopoly controlled all of the territories and caravan routes around the Mediterranean world. This period of isolation fanned the flames of European imagination. Out of this fire were forged dogmatic beliefs in monstrous races such as the Amazons and the cynocephali, miraculous wonders like the Fountain of Youth and rivers full of precious stones in Terrestrial Paradise, and mysterious, enchanted islands in the Atlantic like the Land of Promise of the Saints, Avalon, or more importantly, Antillia; home of the legendary Seven Cities. But of all the myths spawned by European imagination, it can be argued that the legend of Prester John was the most powerful of all. The legend of Prester John was one of the most prevailing forces in history that would greatly influence the social and

political landscape of Europe. From this myth would stem a rich plethora of literature, European exploration into Asia, and diplomatic missions to Africa.

The question that begs to be asked is when and where did this Prester John come from and by whom? Like the legend itself, there are few certainties about the true origin of Prester John. However, what is known is that the first written account about Prester John occurred in the chronicle *Historia de duabus civitatibus* by Otto, Bishop of Freising. In this account Otto refers to the Prester as “Presbyter Johannes.”¹ In the account, Prester John defeats an army of Medes and Persians before his failed attempt to reach Jerusalem. Otto heard this tale from Bishop Hugh of Jabala. Though it has been suggested that Bishop Hugh created the tale, it is more reasonable to believe that the tale had been told orally long before Otto heard it from Bishop Hugh in 1145. Since the nineteenth century, historians have made the connection between Bishop Hugh’s tale of the Prester’s victory over the Persians with an actual historical battle where the empire of Kara-Khitai defeated the Seljuk Turk ruler Sanjar of Persia in 1141.² It is thought that this legend of Prester John was interrelated to the legend of the shrine of St. Thomas among the Nestorian Christian community in India.³ Living in India, Prester John was assumed to be an adherent to Nestorian Christianity, which the Vatican considered heretical.⁴ However, India was significant to Medieval Christians because they believed that after Pentecost, the Apostle Thomas was sent there and preached the gospel, converting and baptizing the Hindus into Christians. There the apostle died and was enshrined by the followers of the faith he had preached unto.⁵ While this piqued the interest of some, what happened next took Europe by storm.

¹ Charles F. Beckingham and Bernard Hamilton, *Prester John: the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes* (Aldershot, Great Britain: Variorum, 1996), 2.

² Robert Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1972), 8-9.

³ Beckingham and Hamilton, *Prester John*, 8.

⁴ Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 8.

⁵ Vsevolod Slessarev, *Prester John: The Letter and the Legend* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), 7.

A mysterious letter appeared in Europe to Emperor Manuel. The author of this letter introduced himself as, "Prester John of the Indies, greatest king of the Christians..."⁶ What follows in the *Letter of Prester John* can best be described as a utopian fantasy. In the *Letter*, the author claims to have sixty kings as his vassals and possesses the strongest castles in the world, numbering sixty two. The author claimed that his empire spread over a vast land that extended beyond the Muslim nations of the Near East.⁷ "You should know that our parts consist of three Indies: India Major, Middle India, and India Minor. The one we dwell is India Major, and the body of St. Thomas the Apostle is in this one. And know also that ours is the land of elephants and camels and lions and griffins, which griffins have such great strength that they can fly and at the same time carry an ox for their young to eat."⁸ Other fascinating creatures are described. "There are in our lands also unicorns who have in front a single horn of which there are three kinds: green, black, and white."⁹

The letter also describes various monstrous peoples in the dominion. Described are those that possess only one eye, those with four eyes in the front and back, those with only a round foot, and a race of Christians no larger than five year old children. There are also those who "are men from the waist up, and in the other direction they are like a horse, and they eat raw meat and carry bows..."¹⁰ Near Babylonia are "the Giants who each year pay us tribute and are subject to our orders."¹¹

Also described are the characteristics that can best be described as "heaven on earth." "There are no thieves in our country, neither among our citizens, nor among the foreigners, for God and St. Thomas would have confounded them, while we would have put them to death."¹² "Let it be known that nobody in our land dares to commit the sin of lechery, for at once he would be burned, because the

⁶ Francis M. Rogers, *The Travels of the Infante Dom Pedro of Portugal* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1961), 150.

⁷ Slessarev, *Prester John*, 4.

⁸ Rogers, *The Travels of the Infante Dom Pedro of Portugal*, 150.

⁹ Slessarev, *Prester John*, 71.

¹⁰ Rogers, *The Travels of the Infante Dom Pedro of Portugal*, 151.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹² Slessarev, *Prester John*, 76.

sacrament of marriage has been ordained by God; nor does anybody dare to lie in our country, for he would be hanged.”¹³ No sin was tolerated. To contrast the austerity, the writer also includes works of Christian charity. The author writes, “...as for the poor of our land, we have them supported from our own income out of love for God.”¹⁴

While all of this fascinated the whole of Europe, the military aspect undoubtedly intrigued the ambitious monarchs and military leaders. The author describes in the *Letter* that when he goes to battle, a cross is carried in front of the army so that all can be reminded of the cross of “Our Lord Jesus Christ...”¹⁵ The author vowed to reconquer the Holy Land and invites the West to join forces in the military campaign. In return, he promises positions of power and large estates.¹⁶ Towards the conclusion the author wrote the striking sentence, “If you can count the stars of the sky and the sands of the sea, you will be able to judge thereby the vastness of our realm and power.”¹⁷ The *Letter* ends with an unusual request and explanation that he be addressed as a priest. “It is on account of our humility to be called by a less important name and title.”¹⁸

There is little known about the origin of the *Letter of Prester John* and how it was introduced in Europe. Alberic de Trois Fontaines, a chronicler of the age, recorded the arrival of the *Letter* in 1165. From there the message was sent to the rest of the Christian kings.¹⁹ It is thought that the author of the *Letter of Prester John* was a Western European of the twelfth century who probably spent part of his life in the Near East where he could become acquainted with the legends of India, Prester John, and the Christians of St. Thomas. The purpose of the letter is still the matter of much debate. Many feel that the author was creating a piece of literature and possibly attempting to inspire the Crusaders and increase

¹³ Ibid., 77.

¹⁴ Rogers, *The Travels of the Infante Dom Pedro of Portugal*, 151.

¹⁵ Ibid., 151-52.

¹⁶ Slessarev, *Prester John*, 4.

¹⁷ Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 2.

¹⁸ Ibid., 37.

¹⁹ Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 33.

their morale with the news that a powerful ally was marching to meet them and help in the fight to reconquer the Holy Land.²⁰ As one of the modern age might nonchalantly say, the *Letter* was a “big hit.” To say so would be the understatement of the past millennium. Originally written in Latin, the *Letter of Prester John* was translated into French, English, Italian, Hebrew, German, Russian and Serbian.²¹ Though the origin of the *Letter* was unknown and clearly dubious, copies were in frenzied circulation throughout the continent by the closing years of the twelfth century.²²

As author Robert Silverberg best described it in his book, *The Realm of Prester John*, “The quest for the realm of Prester John would become one of the greatest romantic enterprises of the middle ages, a geographical adventure akin to the search for El Dorado, for King Solomon’s mines, for the Fountain of Youth, for the Holy Grail, for the Seven Cities of Cibola, for the land of the Amazons, for the lost continent of Atlantis.”²³ Logic and reason would conclude that this *Letter of Prester John* was a fraud. However, Europe readily accepted the *Letter* as authentic and enthusiastically believed that there **was** a powerful priestly king of India, whose empire stretched to the ends of the earth. This was not just the masses, but men in high places as well. Prince Henry the Navigator, for example, was anxious to find Prester John.²⁴ The *Letter* prompted the reply of Pope Alexander III to this “King of India.” The pope’s physician, known only as Philip, was entrusted with the delivery of the Pope’s letter, but nothing has been heard of this Philip or the pope’s letter since.²⁵ Why would the pope go to such lengths if he did not also believe in this Prester John? As the *Letter* continued to circulate, additions began to lengthen and further fantasize the priestly king and his realm.

St. Thomas mythology was continuously amended into the *Letter* through the following centuries as late as the fourteenth. In the original, Apostle Thomas had only been mentioned once in

²⁰ Slessarev, *Prester John*, 55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

²² Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 1.

²³ Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 8.

²⁴ Slessarev, *Prester John*, 5-6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

passing. A twelfth century addition stated that St. Thomas was periodically resurrected during major holidays to preach to the people of Jesus from the Prester's palace. One particular addition stated, "Know that nobody dares to lie in the city of my lord St. Thomas, for he would soon die a miserable death."²⁶

Whatever the purpose or intent of the author of the original *Letter of Prester John*, it can be said with certainty that the impact that the *Letter* had on Europe far exceeded any and all of the wildest expectations that he might have dreamt. The influence and implications were far reaching; extending across centuries, vast geography and several generations. The *Letter* launched Western exploration into a wild goose chase across extensive, exotic terrains in two different continents that would last for centuries due to the dogged determination and persistent ignorance of Medieval Europe. From this point onward, early Western travelers to the Orient had two major goals of visiting the shrine of St. Thomas and going to the court of Prester John.²⁷ Rumors of this powerful Christian potentate of the East continued to surface and flourish. It was said that this Prester John was a descendent of the Magi recorded in the Gospels in the New Testament and that he was lord over the same subjects that the Magi had ruled before him. The Prester's riches were also the subject of much rumor. It was said that he was so rich that his scepter was made entirely of emeralds.²⁸ These rumors of the potentate's most noble birth and his riches further intensified the desire to find the realm of the great Prester John.

In the quest for Prester John, he would be considered and identified with various rulers who appeared to suit the identity as described in the *Letter*. Of these rulers, Genghis Khan was considered a possibility.²⁹ This suspicion seemed to be further justified with the Mongolian invasions of Central Asia and lands in modern day Iran and Afghanistan from 1219-23. These invasions under "Chinggis Khan" had an immense impact on the legend of Prester John. Beleaguered crusaders in Egypt spread the word that

²⁶ Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 143.

²⁷ Rogers, *The Travels of the Infante Dom Pedro of Portugal*, 103.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁹ Slessarev, *Prester John*, 6.

Prester John or his son King David was coming to join forces and rescue the crusaders.³⁰ However, the crusaders and their native continent were greatly mistaken. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Genghis Khan was not a Christian as Europeans had assumed. In fact, the Khan was not an adherent to any of the great religions. If he did harbor hostility towards Islam, it was strictly political and did not pertain to the actual religion. When Genghis Khan unleashed his Mongolian terror on Christendom, Europeans immediately realized that this barbaric onslaught could not possibly be orchestrated by Prester John. They rejected Genghis Khan as being the identity of Prester John. This was a serious blow to the legitimacy of a Christian potentate of the East. However, the belief in Prester John was by now so dominant and concrete in European thought, that despite this major setback, faith in the Prester was unshakable. Although the priestly king had so far proven to be more myth than man, they continued steadfastly in search of him. In their desperation to find him, Europeans abandoned many of the fundamental characteristics that were described in the *Letter*. One example being the priesthood of Prester John. None of the kings that were considered in the aftermath of the Mongolian attack against European states fit the profile.³¹ It is important to note that although Genghis Khan would no longer be considered the Prester John, the Khan would still play a big role in the legend of Prester John, albeit a separate identity. After the Mongolians withdrew from attacking Europe, diplomatic relations between the Mongolians and the Europeans were forged. John Plano of Carpini, a member of the papal envoy to Mongolia, did not fixate on Prester John as other later explorers and diplomats would. He makes only one reference to the priestly king. He records an account of how, "Chinggis, having conquered the Ethiopians, the people of Lesser India, invaded Greater India, whose king, Prester John, defeated the army by sending against it copper men mounted on horses and stuffed with explosive Greek fire..."³²

³⁰ Beckingham and Hamilton, *Prester John*, 159.

³¹ Beckingham and Hamilton, *Prester John*, 160-63.

³² *Ibid.*, 164.

The *Letter of Prester John* was not the only fantasized account to be produced about the Prester. Many others, travel accounts in particular, were circulated in Europe and further fueled the frenzy for the potentate. One such account is the *Book of the Infante Dom Pedro of Portugal Who Traveled Over the Four Parts of the World*. This work was a sixteenth century fictional fantasy written about a real prince, Dom Pedro, who, as the title suggests, traveled all over the world. It was written under the pseudonym Gómez de Santisteban, who claimed to have been one of the twelve who journeyed with the prince on his voyage. Popular from the start, there have been over one hundred editions of the book published in Portuguese and Spanish over the centuries.³³ In the book, Dom Pedro and his company enter into the realm of Prester John and visit with the king.³⁴ There are many fascinating exchanges between the parties and Santisteban writes of many of the customs and traditions of the Prester. One in particular is the ascension of the king. Santisteban wrote, "And when Prester John dies, no one can become the new Prester through inheritance or through personal power, but only through the grace of God and through the intervention of the holy Apostle, who selects him in the way which we shall now relate. All the ordained priests in the city of Alves, which is called Edicia, draw nigh. And they all go in procession around the Apostle. And as for the one whom it pleases God to be Prester and lord of all the others, the Apostle extends his arm toward him and opens his hand."³⁵ This "Apostle" obviously refers to St. Thomas. Eventually, Dom Pedro expresses to Prester John that he and his company must return to the West. The Prester graciously gives Dom Pedro nine thousand pieces of gold to aid them in their return journey. In addition, Santisteban claims that the Prester also gives Dom Pedro his *Letter* to the Western rulers to be taken and delivered when they finish their journey.³⁶ And so Santisteban gives credit to Dom Pedro for being the one who introduced the *Letter* to Europe. This of course is

³³ Rogers, *The Travels of the Infante Dom Pedro of Portugal*, vii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, viii.

³⁶ Rogers, *The Travels of the Infante Dom Pedro of Portugal*, 149.

problematic given the fact that Santisteban's book is a work of fiction. Undoubtedly, there were many who came to believe this false claim.

Considered the most famous traveling account of the era, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* further stirred European expectations to a higher level. According to Sir John Mandeville, possibly a pseudonym, the realm of Prester John is called the "isle of Pentoxere." Furthermore, Prester John had a great castle made that he titled "Paradise." Mandeville reveals that Prester John's realm is rich, but is surpassed by the "land of the Great Khan of Cathay." Reason being, according to Mandeville, the journey to the isle of Pentoxere is far longer and more perilous than the journey to the Mongolian lands.³⁷ Mandeville describes a unique relationship between the Khans and the Presters. "This same royal King Prester John and the Great Khan of Tartary are always allied through marriage; for each of them marries the other's daughter or sister."³⁸ Mandeville further writes of seventy two provinces in the isle of Pentoxere, each being ruled by a king with kings subordinate to them. All of these kings pay tribute to Prester John. Most of the realm adheres to the same Christian faith as their supreme priestly king. As to be expected from a fictitious travel account, Mandeville includes many exotic wonders to behold in the isle of Pentoxere. He describes the "Gravelly Sea"; an impassable sea of gravel containing no water, but full of great fish fit to eat. "In the land of Prester John there is a great plenty of precious stones of different sorts, some so big that they make from them dishes, bowls, cups and many other things too numerous to mention."³⁹ Mandeville also writes of horned wild men who, rather than invoke speech, grunt like pigs. Of the Prester's living quarters Mandeville writes that Prester John resides in his principal palace in the city of Susa. According to Mandeville, when the Prester rides out into battle, three crosses of gold adorned with precious stones are carried before him.⁴⁰ This contrasts with the

³⁷ John Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. C. W. R. D. Moseley (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 167.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

³⁹ Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, 168.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 169-70.

account of Dom Pedro mentioned previously. But such discrepancies are to be expected when studying pseudohistorical accounts.

On the subject of travel accounts of the era, Marco Polo's *Travels* cannot be neglected. The famous Venetian, like Mandeville and Santisteban, has a fascinating episode to write of Prester John. Like Santisteban, Polo too writes of the distinctive relationship between the Khan and Prester John, albeit a more comprehensive, contrasting account. Originally the Tartars (Mongols) were a great plains people who lived on the borders of Chorch. They had no sovereign or king among them. However, they were required to pay tribute to, "...a great prince who was called in their tongue UNC CAN, the same that we call Prester John, him in fact about whose great dominion all the world talks."⁴¹ The Tartars began to multiply exceedingly; so much so, Prester John began to fear a power imbalance in the status quo. He feared a conflict against him could materialize by the confidence in the swelling numerical might of this tributary people. To resolve this issue, Prester John decided to send one of his barons to execute his order for the Tartars to be spread out over various countries. The Tartars became aware of the Prester's plan. They were enraged by this policy and unanimously migrated to a distant land across a desert in the north where they would no longer be under the dominion of the Prester.⁴² As Polo best stated it, "Thus they revolted from his authority and paid him tribute no longer."⁴³ The tale continues with the rise of "Chinghis Kaan" as king of the Tartars. Chinghis became king in 1187. According to Polo (obviously biased), "He was a man of great worth and of great ability (eloquence), and valour."⁴⁴ When word of this new lord spread, a great multitude of Tartars from various countries and regions all over gathered unto the new king. From that point, Chinghis raised a well provisioned army and set forth on his conquest. He conquered eight provinces. According to Polo, he treated the peoples of his newly

⁴¹ Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo: The Complete Yule-Cordier Edition*, ed. Henry Yule and Henri Cordier (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1993), 1:226.

⁴² Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 226-27.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

acquired territories humanely and the people came to be faithful servants to him. In 1200 A.D., Chinghis sent an embassy to Prester John to acquire the Prester's daughter as his wife. This request angered Prester John greatly. To the representatives of Chinghis he replied, "What impudence is this, to ask my daughter to wife! Wist he not well that he was my liegeman and serf? Get ye back to him and tell him that I had liever set my daughter in the fire than give her in marriage to him, and that he deserves death at my hand, rebel and traitor that he is!"⁴⁵ The embassy embarked back to Chinghis and told all that Prester John had replied to the Kaan's request.⁴⁶ According to Polo, when Chinghis Kaan heard the message, "such rage seized him that his heart came nigh to bursting within him..."⁴⁷ After hearing the priestly king's reply, the Kaan vowed revenge on Prester John. According to Polo, He mustered the largest force that had ever been seen or heard of. He sent word to Prester John, "to be on his defence." Prester John did not think that Chinghis Kaan's forces were a serious threat, but he mustered a force of many different nations, "...that it was a world's wonder," in the hope that he could capture and execute the Kaan. Chinghis Kaan arrived at the plain of Tanduc in the realm of Prester John.⁴⁸ Prester John marched his forces to the plain of Tanduc and set his camp twenty miles apart from the Kaan's camp. For two days both armies rested so that they, "...might be fresher and heartier for battle." During this rest period, Chinghis Kaan summoned Christian and Saracen (Muslim) astrologers. He enquired of them whether he or Prester John would be victorious. The Saracens were unable to give a prediction. By divination, the Christians were able to predict that he would be victorious over Prester John. This greatly delighted the Kaan and he held the Christians in high esteem thereafter.⁴⁹ After the period of rest, the two hosts met in battle. According to Polo, "...it was the greatest battle that ever was seen."⁵⁰ Both sides saw a great number among their ranks die in the battle, but at the conclusion of the battle, Chinghis

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 238-39.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 240.

⁴⁸ Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 240.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 241-42.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 244.

Kaan was victorious as predicted by the Christian astrologers. Prester John himself was killed in the battle. From that day on, Prester John's kingdom fell gradually day by day to Chinghis Kaan until the whole realm of the Prester was conquered.⁵¹ The province of Tenduc with its chief city of the same name was ruled by the king that is of the lineage of Prester John. At the time that Marco Polo was writing his *Travels*, he writes of the then current king by the name George who ruled the land under the "Great Kaan."⁵² This King George did not have dominion over the whole of what his ancestor Prester John had ruled. "It is a custom, I may tell you, that these kings of the lineage of Prester John always obtain to wife either daughter of the Great Kaan or other princesses of his family."⁵³ Polo informs the reader that, "You must know that it was in this same capital city of Tenduc that Prester John had the seat of his government when he ruled over the Tartars, and his heirs still abide there; for, as I have told you, this King George is of his line, in fact, he is the sixth in descent from Prester John."⁵⁴ Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Polo's account is that it crushes the aura of invincibility that had surrounded Prester John. Not only that, but Polo's account contradicts the previous versions and conventional wisdom about this illusive potentate. According to Polo, Prester John was a tributary ruler under the dominion of the Khan. This of course, contradicts the all powerful ruler of a borderless land that stretched to the ends of the world that the stiff-necked Europeans had come to know. Because of this fact, Polo's account of Prester John would not be appreciated then as it is today. Polo's writing on Prester John contradicted what Europeans wanted to believe. Therefore, while many merchants largely embraced Polo's *Travels* for its wealth of geographical knowledge, the accounts about Prester John were primarily ignored. Medieval Europe continued searching for the priestly king.

After centuries of searching, Prester John had yet to be discovered. While the priestly king could not be found, many false presumptions had been made. Jacques de Vitry misinterpreted Genghis Khan's

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 284.

⁵³ Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 284.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 284-85.

campaign for the labor of a Christian ruler. Andrew of Longjumeau erroneously identified the Prester as the Kerait chieftan Togrul, a wang-khan. Marco Polo was of the same opinion and as seen previously, he claimed to have discovered King George, the supposed sixth generation descendent of this wang-khan. William of Rubruck was convinced that Prester John was Kuckluk, the Naiman prince. In reference to the search for Prester John in Central Asia, Friar Odoric said, "But as regards him not one hundredth part is true of what is told of him as if it were undeniable..."⁵⁵ With these words the quest for Prester John in Asia ended. However, the search was by no means over. Reason would have shown that the Europeans had been chasing a figment of pure imagination. But as is often the case, man's passions continued to hold sway over reason. This should not come as any surprise. Prester John was by now so ingrained in European thought and belief that the continent would persistently continue the quest. In fact, from this time forward, the search would intensify because the Europeans felt that they had narrowed the search down to one last area.⁵⁶ After the 1320s, the realm of Prester John shifted from Central Asia to Africa. This was first proposed by Dominican friar Jordanus de Sévérac in the aftermath of his voyage to India. He discovered that Prester John simply was not there. He concluded that Prester John must reign in Ethiopia, a land which was little known to Europe.⁵⁷ To the modern mind, this shift may seem unexpected and bizarre. In reality, it was only a matter of time before this geographical leap occurred. As mentioned in the *Letter of Prester John*, the author claimed to be the ruler of three Indias. In the modern world, when one thinks of India, they think of the subcontinent nation. However, the concept of India was a very vague one in Medieval Europe. Many geographers of the day considered Ethiopia to be one of the Indias. After having searched the other two Indias, it is no surprise that all attention was turned to the last India to find the powerful Prester John. Thus the search transferred to the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia. The fact that the ruler of Ethiopia was a Christian seemed to further justify their

⁵⁵ Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 139.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Slessarev, *Prester John*, 84.

reasoning and new course of action.⁵⁸ By the mid fourteenth century, the quest for Prester John had completely transitioned to Ethiopia.⁵⁹ Europe came to consider the name “Prester John” as a hereditary title for all of Ethiopia’s kings. This naturally confused the Ethiopian delegates in 1441 who knew that their king, though a bearer of multiple names and titles, never held this title, “Prester John.” Nonetheless, Europeans were convinced and continued to refer to the kings of Ethiopia by this title.⁶⁰

Because of its location, Ethiopia had always been difficult for Europeans to make contact with. Francisco Alvares was part of a Portuguese mission in 1520 to reach Ethiopia. This was the first European embassy to reach the Court of Ethiopia and return safely.⁶¹ Lebna Dengal, who had ascended to the throne at the age of twelve, was the king of Ethiopia when Alvares and the Portuguese embassy of Dom Rodrigo de Lima arrived.⁶² Throughout the narrative, Lebna Dengal is referred to as Prester John. Reflecting on one meeting, Alvares describes the physical features of whom he blindly believed to be the Prester: “In age, complexion, and stature, he is a young man, not very dark in colour; he is very much a man of breeding, of middling stature; like that, his face is round, the eyes large, the nose high in the middle, and his beard is beginning to grow. In presence and state he fully looks like the great lord that he is.”⁶³ Alvares and the rest of the Portuguese embassy undoubtedly had to give a report to their government after its return to Portugal. The fascinating element in all of this is that these men unwittingly further added to the diplomatic confusion between Europe and Ethiopia and further enhanced the legend of Prester John. As was their custom in the age of exploration, the Portuguese wore out their welcome as guests in Ethiopia. In the seventeenth century, after much turmoil and Ethiopian bloodshed caused by the Jesuit priests and missions, King Fasiladas ordered all Catholic priests

⁵⁸ Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 163-64.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶¹ Francisco Alvares, *The Prester John of the Indies: A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John being the narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520*, ed. C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford (Cambridge: The University Press, 1961), 1.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 304.

out of the country. Ethiopia would readopt its policy of isolation from the outside world that the country had adhered to for centuries before the arrival of the Portuguese. The pope tried to send French Capuchins twice. Both times, they were executed by the Ethiopians. Franciscans smuggled themselves into Ethiopia but were caught and stoned. With the exception of a very few, Ethiopia sealed itself off from the rest of the world and would not let foreigners, especially Catholics and their missionaries, into the country.⁶⁴

This diplomatic disaster stirred Europe out of its deep delusional slumber to face a grim revelation. As best stated by Silverberg, "...the Portuguese experience had convinced Europe for all time of the folly of the Prester John myth. Prester John had been found, and he was no king of miracles, but only a black-skinned chieftain of a wild and primitive land, who dined on raw beef and imprisoned his brothers on mountaintops. Reality had destroyed the golden vision."⁶⁵ The great mystery of the powerful, elusive Christian king Prester John of the Indies unraveled, recounting a quest that spanned hundreds of years only to conclude that it had all been in vain. To know that for nearly half a millennium Europe's most sought after individual, a man who became powerful enough to influence the Western social and political landscape, was nothing more than a concoction of the mind must have been an embarrassing disappointment and realization to the Europeans like no other. Being one of the greatest myths of all time, the legend of Prester John has reserved an enduring place in the history of Western Civilization most importantly, but also in African and Asian history as well. Unlike many myths that fade from time and memory, Prester John has stood the test of time. The great English playwright and poet William Shakespeare referred to Prester John in his play *Much Ado About Nothing*. In the first scene of the second act, the character Benedick exclaims, "Will your Grace command me any service to the world's end? I will go on the slightest errand now to the Antipodes that you can devise to send me on; I will fetch you a toothpicker now from the furthest inch of Asia; bring you the length of Prester John's

⁶⁴ Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 313-14.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 314.

foot; fetch you a hair off the great Cham's beard; do you any embassage to the Pygmies...You have no employment for me?"⁶⁶ To be merely mentioned in one of the plays of Shakespeare, considered widely to be the greatest playwright of all time, is an honor that was rarely given to factual individuals, much less fabled entities.

The legend of Prester John is truly one of the most fascinating chronicles of history. Medieval Europe breathed life into this fictitious king and added an air of legitimacy to his existence with their desperate quests throughout Asia and Africa to find him. The search for a powerful Christian potentate of the East ended hundreds of years ago. However, the quest for Prester John has not. Since the nineteenth century, modern historians and scholars have been diligently seeking the origins of the priestly king. Though their aims are quite different, modern historian and scholars are undertaking a task just as strenuous as that adopted by the Medieval explorers before them. Though some knowledge has come to light, the origins of Prester John continue to be shrouded in mystery and elude the modern age. Given that the legend was conceived in the Dark Ages, there is little hope that the world will ever fully know the origins of the Prester. Thus, Prester John will continue to captivate man's imagination until the end of time.

⁶⁶ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. David L. Stevenson (New York: Signet Classic, 1998), 27.

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