

Configuring Faith, Locating Monarchs, Connecting Worlds: The Strange History of Prester John across the Indian Ocean

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The worlds of Central Asia and the Indian Ocean are seen as discrete, seemingly unconnected except by way of the silk roads descending through feeder routes into port-cities situated along the Indian Ocean and its many seas, gulfs, and bays. And yet, unlike subsequent centuries when Central Asia lost its historical centrality and came to be regarded increasingly as a blank space on the map, it was seen as a dynamic space, known to Europe through the Alexandrine campaigns and subsequently made familiar by way of the travels of medieval Christian friars and then the Polos through the Mongol Khanates which linked Europe and Asia through a silver century.¹

The Indian Ocean with its spice, cotton and silk routes was even more familiar. Classical European empires knew of it through their trade across the ocean and their need of spices and textiles ensured that the Indian Ocean world remained central in the European imaginary.² Also, for Christians, the Earthly Paradise was increasingly thought to be located in an undefined island in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, in 1317 the crusades extended into this ocean as well.³ Therefore, for various reasons, the Indian Ocean entered European geographical knowledge—and fantasy—from antiquity.

These two worlds, the terrestrial and the oceanic, have been seen as diametrically opposed, with historiography privileging the latter. The continental world of Central Asia is usually regarded as intrinsically poorer in terms of resources, cultural contacts and commercial networking, but the pendulum is now swinging back in its favour as cradle of cultural contacts.⁴ This essay links the two worlds—one maritime, the other continental—by evoking the legend of Prester John, mysterious Christian monarch of the East and putative ally against Muslims across the Indian Ocean. It references the legend in religious epistles and travel texts and studies cartographic depictions of John and his kingdom to trace the life of this fabulous monarch, his career an example of connectivities between Central Asia and the Indian Ocean long before the geographical discoveries took off in Europe and made the world one.

¹ Roxann Prazniak, 'Siena on the Silk Roads: Ambrogio Lorenzetti and the Mongol Global Century, 1250–1350', *Journal of World History*, 21, 2, June 2010, 177-217; Roxann Prazniak, 'Tabriz on the Silk Roads: Thirteenth-Century Eurasian Cultural Connections', *Asian Review of World Histories* 1:2 (July 2013), 169-188; R.I. Moore, 'The Transformation of Europe as a Eurasian Phenomenon', *Medieval Encounters* 10,1-3, 2004, 77-98; R. I. Moore, 'The Birth of Europe as a Eurasian Phenomenon', *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 3, Special Issue: The Eurasian Context of the Early Modern History of Mainland South East Asia, 1400-1800. (Jul., 1997), 583-601; Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1989); Henry Yule, *Cathay and the way thither: being a collection of medieval notices of China*, London: Hakluyt Society, 1866, 2 vols; Marco Polo, *Travels*, various editions; Akinobu Kuroda, 'The Eurasian silver century, 1276–1359: commensurability and multiplicity', *Journal of Global History* (2009) 4, 245–269.

² Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, Translated by Arthur Goldhammer, University of Chicago Press, 1982, 189-200.

³ Ranabir CHAKRAVARTI, 'The Indian Ocean Scenario in the 14th Century Latin Crusade Tract: Possibilities of a World Historical Approach', *Asian Review of World Histories* 3:1 (January 2015), 37-58.

⁴ Wang Gungwu, 'Global History: Continental and Maritime', *Asian Review of World Histories* 3:2 (July 2015), 201-218.

1 An Universal Nilotic - Indic World

One such connectivity was by way of perceiving the Nile and the Indus as a single river. Europe knew of the Nile, the Euphrates, the Tigris, and the Indus. Greek, Arab and Catalan notices often included the Oxus in the list. Of these, the Nile was best known, being for Egyptians the original river - sea encircling the globe, referenced biblically as the Gion, second river of Paradise.⁵

A principal river of Asia—the Indus—was equated with the Pishon, the first of the four rivers of Eden in the *Book of Genesis*:

‘Now the river goeth out from Eden to water Paradise. And from there it was parted and became four heads. The name of the first is Phison (Pishon); that is it which compasseth the whole land of Euilat (India), where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; there is the carbuncle and the jasper stone ...’.⁶

Cosmas Indicopleustes reinforced the identification: ‘Sindu is on the frontier of India, for the river Indus, that is, the Phison, which discharges into the Persian Gulf, forms the boundary between Persia and India’.⁷ The Indus became an universal river and as the westernmost South Asian river was regarded as a continuation of the Nile, which apparently united India and Africa through an underground course running beneath the Indian Ocean. The Indus’ similarity with the Nile was underlined by the fact that its local name happened to be Nilab and, like the Nile, it flooded annually.

With time, in geographic imagination, the river extended eastward to China as well, since the Central Asian Indus route was more favoured initially for Chinese explorations and pilgrim passages into India rather than the Ganges route which, although shorter, only took off when the two routes through Yunnan-Burma and Nepal were discovered around the eighth century, as it was cumbersome, involving a combination of land travel, fluvial crossings and a sea voyage from the Gulf of Tongkin into the Bay of Bengal.⁸

The 18th chapter of Book II of the recently discovered Arabic *Book of Curiosities*, the original dating from between 1020 and 1050, contains five maps of five individual river courses: the Nile, the Euphrates, the Tigris, the Indus and the Oxus. The Indus represents the entire sub-continent and links it with China. Its map is of particular interest, for it represents all the major rivers of northern India—the Indus, the Ganges, and the Brahmaputra—as one continuous river system, with lateral rivers branching off in many directions. While in reality the Indus flows westwards from its origins in the Himalayas, and the Ganges and the Brahmaputra flow east towards the Bay of Bengal, the map envisages a single river system originating in the mountains of Tibet. This single river apparently runs from east to west across the northern part of the Indian subcontinent, eventually

⁵ Martin W Lewis, ‘Dividing the ocean sea’, *Geographical Review*, 89, 2, (Apr 1999), 188-214.

⁶ *Letter to Rusticus*, no. 75, c. 411 A.D, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, <http://www.ccel.org/fathers.html>. Accessed 22 October 2015.

⁷ J. W. McCrindle, trans. Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographia Christiana*, Book 11. London, 1897, transcribed by Roger Pearse, Ipswich, UK, 2003.

⁸ Edouard Chavannes, ‘Voyage de Song Yun dans l’Udyana et le Gandhara’, *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient*, Année 1903, 3, 1, 379 – 441, 386-7; F. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into their Ancient and Mediaeval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records*, Shanghai & Hong Kong: Kelly & Walsh, 1885, 74-5; Paul Pelliot, ‘Deux itinéraires de Chine en Inde à la fin du VIIIe siècle’, *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient*, 1904, 4, 1, 131 – 413, 142-3; Wilfred H. Schoff, ‘Navigation to the Far East under the Roman Empire’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 37, 1917, 240-249, 242-5.

flowing into the Indian Ocean. Branch itineraries drawn on the map of the Indus continue into southern China.⁹

If the Chinese and Muslims saw this space as encircled by the Indus system, for Europeans the notion of a geographical space denoted by a single river system was even stronger. Different markers constituted this vast space for Europeans; biblical paradisiacal notions, travel accounts and received information about fluvial courses resulted in conflicting representations on maps and texts. These various representations shaped perceptions of India as an infinitely elastic space, terms such as *India inferior*, *India superior*, *India ultima* and *India Egyptyi* being current. Marignolli, viewing Asia from the East, saw three blocs of Manzi, Minibar and Maabar: ‘India was peopled and divided into three kingdoms. The first ... is called Manzi ... formerly called Cyn and it has to this day the noble port and city called Cynkalan, i.e. “Great India” ... the second India... is called Mynibar ... The third province of India is called Maabar’ where, visiting the supposed tomb of St Thomas in Mylapur c. 1352, he discerned an India spanning the east and west coasts of Africa and India.¹⁰ The continuous river system of the Indus therefore united a vast space from China to East Africa.

Marco Polo, viewing Asia from the West, divided India into the Greater, the Lesser, and the Middle. The Greater was the whole of India and the peninsula—the country extending from the Ganges to the Indus inclusive—and the Lesser included the region between the eastern coast of the peninsula of India, and that of Cochinchina or Champa. Polo called Abyssinia, the coast of Arabia and the Persian Gulf Middle or Second India, unlike Niccolo da Conti who named it ‘Greater India’ or ‘India Major’, extending from Persia to the Indus and including the Swahili coast of Africa.¹¹

Between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries therefore, three travellers—Marco Polo, John de Marignolli and Niccolo de Conti—saw an unified Indian Ocean realm that stretched from east Africa to south China as ‘India’, also known as the Three Indies. But this three-fold scheme was disrupted by Pierre d’Ailly’s *Imago Mundi* of 1410 which regarded the Gion as the Indus and not the Nile, thereby precipitating even more confusion between the two rivers.¹²

2 The Nilotic-Indic World, Prester John and a Global History of the Middle Ages

The legend of Prester John surfaced in the European middle ages against this imaginary geography. His location, reportedly ruling Africa upto the Indus—i.e. Greater India—fluctuated, given the Indus’ association with the Nile referenced in the terms *India ultima* or *India Egypti*. Following the three divisions of India, it focussed on Central Asia, then India, subsequently on Africa and finally, and curiously, on Japan.

⁹ Yossef Rapoport and Emilie Savage-Smith, ‘Medieval Islamic View of the Cosmos: The Newly Discovered *Book of Curiosities*’, *The Cartographic Journal*, Vol. 41 No. 3, December 2004, 253–259, 258-9.

¹⁰ Andrew Kurt, ‘The search for Prester John, a projected crusade and the eroding prestige of Ethiopian kings, c.1200–c.1540’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 39, 3, 2013, 1-24, 6; JOHN DE MARIGNOLLI and his *Recollections of Eastern TRAVEL*, 1339-1353, in Sir Henry Yule/Henri Cordier, *Cathay and the way thither: being a collection of medieval notices of China*, London: Hakluyt Society, Second Series, VOL. III, 1914, 248-50.

¹¹ John Masefield intr. *Marco Polo’s Travels* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1908); Poggio Bracciolini’s account of Conti in R.H. Major, (ed.) *India in the fifteenth century: Being a collection of narratives of voyages to India in the century preceding the Portuguese discovery of the Cape of Good Hope*, London: Hakluyt Society, 1857, 21.

¹² Suzanne Conklin Akbari, Amilcare A. Iannucci, John Tulk, *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West*, University of Toronto Press, 2008, 112-13.

In Fra Mauro's map of 1450 Prester John's principal residence in Ethiopia is depicted as a fortified citadel. But the anonymous Genoese map of 1457, based on Niccolo de Conti's travels, shows him in three locations: in Alexandrine Asia, in Asia proper and in Ethiopia; in the last he is shown as ruler. Gerardus Mercator's 1628 map of Africa shows the ageless Prester John seated, with a cross in his kingdom on the upper Nile, the mythical king still facing east. Therefore, even when finally and definitively located in Africa, the Prester was still intimately linked with Asia.

The legend first appeared in Central Asia after two significant events: in 1141 Yeh-lu Ta-shih, a China-born Khitan warrior and empire-builder, defeated the Seljuk sultan Sanjar, and in 1144 the crusaders lost Edessa to the Turkish atabeg Zengi. The Nestorian communities of Central Asia who had been oppressed under Muslim rule certainly welcomed Sanjar's and the Persian army's defeat in 1141 and Yeh-lu Ta-shih was probably regarded as saviour. Seen as the original Prester John, the ruler of Black Cathay—a literal translation of Qara or black Khitai (Cathay)—the legend of Yeh-lu Ta-shih as Prester John now proliferated in Central Asia. The essential ingredients for the creation of a new legend had appeared: paradise and the fountain of youth, powerful Oriental monarchs, the wealth and splendour of Asia, and the presence of people in Asia praised since antiquity for their virtues, and others who had reputedly been converted to the Christian faith.¹³

India - Central Asia - India

In the backdrop of the crusades, the search for a Christian ally against Muslims became crucial. In 1122, a great event occurred in Rome; a 'Patriarch John' of India arrived there to receive confirmation in his office after the death of his predecessor. While in Rome, the Patriarch lectured on his native country: it was an earthly paradise near the original Garden of Eden, its principal city was Hulna on the River Phison carrying gold and gems, and its source lay in Paradise. It has been speculated that this ruler may have been a dark skinned—'Aethiopian' — gypsy chief from Central Asia, but in all likelihood he was a Nestorian Indian.¹⁴

Soon after the legend shifted to Central Asia, but it still involved a Nestorian Christian monarch. In 1145 Bishop Otto of Freising reported a mighty Nestorian Christian Patriarch John ruling lands beyond Persia and Armenia. John was a magi, commanding his people with an emerald sceptre (symbol of the sea, perhaps?)¹⁵ In 1165, the Byzantine Emperor Manuel received a letter reputedly written from 'Prester John', again describing his kingdom—the Three Indies—and declaring his intention to defeat the enemies of Christ and visit the Holy Sepulchre. The Indus re-appeared in the letter, now explicitly linked with the Pishon: 'In one of the heathen provinces', the letter related, 'there flows a river called the Indus, which, issuing from Paradise, extends its windings through all the country', encompassing Asia. The letter prompted the Vatican to dispatch a mission east in the hope of enlisting Prester John's aid against the Saracens. The king of the Three Indies reappeared again fifty years later, at the time of the Fifth Crusade. In 1217 the news spread among the Franks in Palestine that Prester John was about to join the Crusade against the Saracens. This was followed two years later by a report reaching the Crusaders at Damietta in Egypt, that King David, the

¹³ Igor de Rachewiltz, 'Prester John and Europe's Discovery of East Asia', *East Asian History*, 11, June 1996, 59-74, 62, 66; Joel Brewer Keagan tr. *Prester John: The Legend and its Sources*, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2015, 21.

¹⁴ David J. Nemeth, 'Prester John and the Gypsies', in Joanne Grumet (ed.). *Papers From the Eighth and Ninth Annual Meeting of the Gypsy Lore Society*, North American Chapter, New York: Gypsy Lore Society, Publication No. 4, 1988, 139-152, 146-8.

¹⁵ Otto Of Freising, *Of the Two Cities*, Book 7, ch. 33, 1157.

Christian King of India, was advancing into Persia to attack the Muslims. There were several versions of this report: in one King David was identified with Prester John, in others with his son or grandson. The fresh reports about Prester John and King David occurred against a backdrop of cataclysmic events in Central Asia. The Mongol conquests were remaking Asia's contours. For example, the Nestorian prince Kuchlug who seized the Qara-Khitay throne in 1211 faced the Muslim rulers of Persia and Afghanistan before being defeated and killed by Chingis Khan, whose westward push during 1219-23 saw Mongol armies crossing Asia into the Caucasus: as far as Georgia, Armenia, and southern Russia.¹⁶

But there was a problem in identifying the Mongols with the Prester, because the destruction wrought by them in Asia and Europe contrasted with the imagery of pious Christian soldiers and of the Christian dynasty of Prester John. To ascertain this once and for all, Pope Innocent IV sent several embassies composed of Franciscan and Dominican friars to Asia in 1245, this date marks the real beginning of political and cultural contacts between Europe and Asia. The Italian Franciscan John of Pian di Carpine reached the Mongol camp in 1246 and heard a story about the Prester. Prester John, the Christian king of Greater or Northern India, had been attacked by Chingis Khan, but had defeated him with a trick. The trick was similar to that used by Alexander to defeat the Indian king Porus by filling metal statues with burning embers so as to disperse the enemy's elephants, an obvious reference to the *Alexander Romance*. The eternal appeal of this saga in Central and Western Asia, especially in Persia, was utilised to enrich stories about military exploits, and this was the mechanism through which the Mongols, through the intermediary of the Nestorians, tried to sell a fictitious Prester John to the West.¹⁷

The trickery continued. In 1247, the Mongol commander in Persia devised a plan of securing the support of the Franks when planning to attack the Caliph of Baghdad. The idea was to launch a simultaneous attack on Egypt with the help of the Franks, so as to prevent the Sultan of Egypt from coming to the assistance of the Caliph. To this end, the commander sent two Nestorian Christian envoys to King Louis IX—St Louis—of France. The Mongol emissaries put forth the proposal for a joint Mongol Christian alliance against the Muslims and, in order to sell the plan to the Franks, they claimed that Prester John's daughter was the mother of the Mongol emperor and that the emperor himself had been converted to Christianity. Here once again, the legend concerned not the Prester himself but his descendants. King Louis sent the Dominican friar Andrew of Longjumeau with an impressive embassy with magnificent gifts to the Mongol court in response.¹⁸

That was not to be the last mission. Friar John of Montecorvino was sent by Pope Nicholas IV as papal legate to the Mongols in 1291 to investigate the familial and other links of Nestorian Christianity with the Mongol court, the notion of kinship ties possibly stemming from the reports of family links of the Ongut king with the Mongol royal family and his supposed relationship with Prester John. By now the Catholic church's contacts with the Mongol rulers of Persia, the Il-Khans, were established and a Nestorian monk—originally from the Ongut kingdom—had arrived in Rome as ambassador of the Il-Khan Arghun in 1287. The information generated in the four years between 1287 and 1291 made Europe familiar not only about China, but also about India, as by then

¹⁶ Rachewiltz, 'Prester John', 65-6.

¹⁷ Rachewiltz, 'Prester John', 69.

¹⁸ Rachewiltz, 'Prester John', 67, 69, 70.

the Eastern Mongol empire could be reached by sea, via Persia, Hurmuz, Kollam, Sumatra and Champa, as well as by land. When thirteenth-century travellers such as William of Rubrouck and Marco Polo visited Asia, the notion of China and Africa being linked still persisted. But in both Polo's narrative and in the *Catalan Atlas* of 1375 there is no indication of the Indus, a striking omission, an oversight probably rising from confounding the Indus with the Ganges. But their identifications of Prester John with minor central Asian non-Christian kings turned attention away from Central Asia and China. In fact, Odoric of Pordenone virtually dismissed the notion of Prester John in China in his report of 1330, declaring the Prester's country as negligible: 'I arrived at the country of Prester John; but as regards him not one hundredth part is true of what is told of him as if it were undeniable. His principal city is called Tozan, and chief city though it is, Vicenza would be reckoned its superior. He has, however, many other cities under him, and by a standing compact always receives to wife the Great Khan's daughter.'¹⁹

The Prester John myth now again locked onto India, the priest-king becoming firmly linked with the ancient Christian population in India, depicted occasionally as the guardian of St Thomas' tomb in the Malabar region of Kerala.

Africa

But this time, the identification was short-lived. Jordan Catalini of Severac visited India and, not finding Prester John there, thought him to be found in Ethiopia, a country he knew only from hearsay. The first mention of John in his new guise as African king appeared in his *Mirabilia descripta* of 1323. The first extant map to mention Prester John's location in eastern Africa was a nautical chart made in 1339 on Majorca by Angelino Dulcert.²⁰ Prester John, true to his chameleon-like career, although now reappeared in his former splendour as the emperor of Ethiopia, was, apparently, already identified with the ruler of Ethiopia in a work, now lost, of John of Carignano dated 1306. By 1350 Nubia and Ethiopia were referenced in Europe as the country of Prester John.²¹ The Catalan Atlas of 1375 shows a King Stephen in mainland India—but this certainly stemming from the legend of Prester John—but the atlas curiously also mentions Nubian Christians, under the rule of the Emperor of Ethiopia and belonging to the realm of Prester John. Therefore, at this time the Prester was solidly located in Africa.

Sir John Mandeville's account, written c. 1357 onwards, clearly distinguished the new Prester John from earlier incarnations:

'This Prester John hath under him many kings and many isles and many diverse folk of diverse conditions. And this land is full good and rich, but not so rich as is the land of the great Chan. For the merchants come not thither so commonly for to buy merchandises, as they do in the land of the great Chan, for it is too far to travel to. And on that other part, in the Isle of Cathay, men find all manner thing that is need to man—cloths of gold, of silk, of spicery and all

¹⁹ Rachewiltz, 'Prester John', 72-3; HENRY YULE (Tr. and Ed.), Henri Cordier (revised), *Cathay AND THE WAY THITHER; BEING A COLLECTION OF MEDIEVAL NOTICES OF CHINA, WITH A PRELIMINARY ESSAY ON the Intercourse BETWEEN CHINA AND the WESTERN Nations PREVIOUS TO THE DISCOVERY OF THE CAPE ROUTE*, LONDON: THE HAKLUYT SOCIETY, Second Series no. 33, vol. 2, 1913, 244-6.

²⁰ Kurt, 'The search for Prester John..', 4-6.

²¹ Rachewiltz, 'Prester John', 72-3.

manner avoirdupois. And therefore, albeit that men have greater cheap in the Isle of Prester John, natheles, men dread the long way and the great perils in the sea in those parts.’²²

What is remarkable in Mandeville’s account is the stress on commerce, or lack thereof, and not on Prester John as putative ally against the Saracens. The attempt to discover material resources now paralleled the search for an imaginary kingdom.²³ The crusades were almost over, Europe was undergoing the fourteenth century depression, its birthing into the early modern period.

Finally, in Conti’s definitive fifteenth-century account, Prester John became firmly ensconced in Africa. The passage from Asia to Africa was rendered possible through several factors: the negus of Ethiopia combined political and religious authority, and bore the title of *zan*, meaning ‘king’. The word *žān* sounded too much like ‘Jean’ or ‘John’ to pass unnoticed.²⁴ Also the ambiguity of the term ‘India’; the view that Middle or Greater India was identical with Ethiopia or Abyssinia; and the fact that Ethiopia was ruled by a Christian dynasty were additional factors.

Ethiopia - India

This geographical ambiguity had, of course, a long lineage. In classical perception, Africa and India were one, and the Nile was not always regarded as an African river. Alexander, Virgil and Procopius, seeing Ethiopia and India as one, believed it originated in India. The geographical fancy was visible in Homer and Aeschylus’ works where, to go from Europe to Asia, one crossed Ethiopia. Herodotus, Diodorus and Pliny saw the interplay of Africans and Asians in West Asia, Herodotus referencing ‘two sorts of Ethiopians’ in his illustration of the composition of the Persian army. ‘The eastern Ethiopians . . . served with the Indians. These were just like the southern Ethiopians, except for their language and their hair: [it] is straight, while that of the Ethiopians in Libya is the crispest and curliest in the world. The equipment of the Ethiopians from Asia was in most respects like the Indian. . . .’ Herodotus therefore situated a distinct group of Africans in Asia — ‘Ethiopians’ — applying certain cultural affinities that might be recognised among ‘Indians’.²⁵

Ptolemy was the exception, although he linked Africa to China by way of an enclosed Indian Ocean, he separated Ethiopia from India and devoted considerable space to the Nile as a separate river. But Procopius, in the sixth century, still described the Nile as flowing from India into Egypt, dissecting the land into two equal parts to the sea.²⁶

Because India-Ethiopia were seen as one, once he was not found in India, Prester John had to be sent to Africa. Here he operated once again as trickster-magician irresistibly—and forcefully— attracting Western travellers deeper and deeper into remote lands. Prester John was directly or indirectly involved in most of the travels and explorations of Asia and Africa. These revealed the true face of these lands to Europe for the first time in history, seen in the early fourteenth-century

²² A. W. Pollard, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville: The version of the Cotton Manuscript in modern spelling*, With three narratives, in illustration of it, from Hakluyt’s “Navigations, Voyages & Discoveries”, London and New York: Macmillan, 1900, 178.

²³ I - Chun Wang, ‘Alexander the Great, Prester John, Strabo of Amasia, and Wonders of the East’, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.5 (2012): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss5/4>> accessed 24 December 2015, page 4 of 9.

²⁴ Rachewiltz, ‘Prester John’, 74.

²⁵ Maghan Keita, ‘Africans and Asians: Historiography and the Long View of Global Interaction’, *Journal of World History*, 16, 1 (2005): 1-30, 9-10.

²⁶ Steven G. Darian, ‘The Ganges and the rivers of Eden’, *Études asiatiques: revue de la Société Suisse - Asie*, 31 (1977), 42-54, 43.

maps of Pietro Vesconte, Martin Sanudo, and the famous map of Fra Paolino, which incorporated information drawn from the works of John of Pian di Carpine and William of Rubrouck. These maps also show the migration to Africa of the peripatetic trickster: in Fra Paolino's map of c.1320 he is still placed in Asia, but in that of Angelino Dulcert of 1339 he is found in Abyssinia.

In 1404 an epistolary exchange from the Friuli region of Italy noted: 'There are here three black Ethiopians from India, good Christians, who brought along a young interpreter, they want to visit holy churches and always ask about sacred relics'.²⁷ Thus, Prester John was depicted as *Indorum Rex*, reinforced by d'Ailly's identification of the Indus—and not the Nile—as the Gion. But in Africa, in his new avatar and in his new country of adoption, the Prester continued to fire the imagination of Europe, so much so that the captains of Prince Henry the Navigator undertook voyages along the African coast in the first half of the fifteenth century in search of this elusive Christian king and his rich country. The Portuguese explorations led to new and exciting discoveries, not in the ambit of this essay.²⁸

3 Power, Authority and Opulence

Prester John was not only an allegory of power, served by lesser potentates and commanding numerous men and beasts of burden, he also became synonymous with Asiatic splendour, Oriental opulence and Saharan gold. In western thought the power of a monarch was directly proportionate to the size of the territory he governed, and the amount of manpower and gold he could command at will. And, in the western imagination, such potentates were to be found in the East. Thus, in his letter of 1165 to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel, the Prester claimed his palace in Asia was adorned with two golden apples, each topped with a crystal; it contained tables of gold, amethyst and ivory, beds of sapphire, ceilings of topaz and sapphire, floors of crystal, columns with large carbuncles (diamonds) and steps encrusted with precious stones. The extent of his empire was limitless, akin to the celestial sky and the infinite ocean.²⁹

Despite his sober and detailed information about Asian commerce, politics, and culture, Linschoten wrote c. 1596:

'Now to say something of Prester John, being the greatest and mightiest prince in all Africa, his country beginneth from the entrance into the red sea, and reacheth to the Iland of Siene... so that to set down the greatnesse of all the countries which this Christian king hath under his commandment, they are in compasse 4000. Italian miles... his government is over many countries and kingdoms that are rich and abundant in gold and silver, and precious stones, and all sorts of metals'.³⁰

For Mandeville, Prester John's territory had shrunk but he still commanded great wealth. He: 'dwelleth commonly in the city of Susa. And there is his principal palace, that is so rich and so noble, that no man will trow it by estimation, but he had seen it. And above the chief tower of the

²⁷ Matteo Salvatore, 'The Ethiopian Age of Exploration: Prester John's Discovery of Europe, 1306–1458', *Journal of World History*, 21, 4 (2011), 593–627, 607.

²⁸ Rachewiltz, 'Prester John', 74.

²⁹ Jean Delumeau, *History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition*, Translated by Matthew O'Connell, University of Illinois Press, 2000, 76–7.

³⁰ Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, *Voyages into ye East and West Indies* (1598). (Amsterdam: Walter J. Johnson, Inc./Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, Ltd., 1974), 214.

palace be two round pommels of gold, and in everych of them be two carbuncles great and large, that shine full bright upon the night. And the principal gates of his palace be of precious stone that men clepe sardonix, and the border and the bars be of ivory. And the windows of the halls and chambers be of crystal. And the tables whereon men eat, some be of emeralds, some of amethyst, and some of gold, full of precious stones; and the pillars that bear up the tables be of the same precious stones. And the degrees to go up to his throne, where he sitteth at the meat, one is of onyx, another is of crystal, and another of jasper green, another of amethyst, another of sardine, another of cornelian, and the seventh, that he setteth on his feet, is of chrysolite. And all these degrees be bordered with fine gold, with the other precious stones, set with great pearls orient. And the sides of the siege of his throne be of emeralds, and bordered with gold full nobly, and dubbed with other precious stones and great pearls. And all the pillars in his chamber be of fine gold with precious stones, and with many carbuncles, that give great light upon the night to all people.³¹

Compare this with his description of the court of the Great Khan, where:

‘above the emperor's table and the other tables, and above a great part in the hall, is a vine made of fine gold. And it spreadeth all about the hall. And it hath many clusters of grapes, some white, some green, some yellow and some red and some black, all of precious stones. The white be of crystal and of beryl and of iris; the yellow be of topazes; the red be of rubies and of grenaz and of alabrandines; the green be of emeralds, of perydoz and of chrysolites; and the black be of onyx and garantez. And they be all so properly made that it seemeth a very vine bearing kindly grapes.’³²

The style and the description of wealth is very similar for both potentates, and it is immediately apparent that in contemporary geo-politics, Prester John was identified with Kublai Khan in the fourteenth-century imagination.

4 Imagining John

But once the Mongol threat had disappeared, the Prester's days in Asia were doomed. The legend had persisted for over five hundred years. Prester John's letter to the French King in 1500 claimed he had lived for 562 years, and he proclaimed the magic qualities of the fountain of youth situated in his realm that he partook of six times in his life as cause of his longevity.³³ In actual fact there was never a Prester John, but the belief in his existence resulted in the notion of a common identity and a shared Christian heritage across continents. These ideas of common identity and shared heritage continued to influence European literature, paintings, geography and cartography.³⁴ There were more than one hundred manuscripts of letters attributed to Prester John throughout the world, because they were translated, copied, and reproduced in different languages.³⁵

³¹ Mandeville, *Travels*, Chapter XXX.

³² Mandeville, *Travels*, Chapter XXIII.

³³ Michael E. Brooks, ‘Prester John: a reexamination and compendium of the mythical figure who helped spark European expansion’, (2009). Theses and Dissertations. Paper 1044, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2065&context=theses-dissertations>, accessed 24 December 2015, 94.

³⁴ Salvatore, ‘The Ethiopian Age of Exploration..’; Prazniak, ‘Siena on the Silk Roads’.

³⁵ I - Chun Wang, ‘Alexander the Great..’, 5.

The Prester John legend is regarded as a Christian propaganda, fathered by Nestorians, mothered by Christian nations of the West, and subsequently taken up by the Mongols, but for different reasons. The legend's chief aim was the destruction of Muslim power so as to provide unimpeded access to Central Asia.³⁶ The legend therefore had not only a religious message but strategic overtones. This may be seen in the fact that in seventeenth century Russia, after the disorders of the Orthodox Church, Russians turned to the idea of a Christian kingdom in the East: a patriarch of the Assyrian tongue living in Japan. This idea spreading more and more widely, finally spread throughout the entire Russian Old Faith, exactly as the rumour spread during the European middle ages and was accepted as truth for several centuries of the existence somewhere in the East of Prester John. Japan as Prester John's homeland was identified as Oponia:

'There seems to be little doubt that this mysterious Byelovodiye and Oponia with its countless islands, its mountain peaks, and its isolated character, is Japan ... (the) great wealth of India reappears in the riches of Oponia. A more striking similarity is the great piety and morality of its population. We have seen the great virtue of the Orthodox of Oponia'.³⁷

The identification dates to John of Pian di Carpine; he spoke of Narayrgen or 'People of the Sun' in 1246, but this identification has since been contested.³⁸

The strategic element in the legend is best seen from the Prester's depiction on the Genoese World Map of 1457. Here are representations of the Mongols as contemporary rulers and also as enclosed people, in the same area enclosed by Alexander. There are two Iron Gates, the one further east explicitly related to Alexander and illustrating the tendency at the time to move landmarks eastwards, when their earlier, supposed location proved to be false. A bit to the east of the far eastern gate, Prester John is said to have built towers to ensure that the enclosed people could not escape. Thus, Prester John appears as Alexander's co-constructor in enclosing the people of the end times. But all these are depicted side by side with a prediction of the coming Antichrist. Prester John embodies the multiple timelines depicted on the map: the past of Alexander, the present of more or less contemporary rulers, and the apocalyptic future of Antichrist.³⁹

Despite being 'found' in Africa, Prester John continued to be identified with India. When Rabelais, in the 1530s, imagined a future marriage and progeny for Pantagruel, he foresaw that his giant would one day marry the daughter of the king of India, Prester John, evidence that the notion of the There Indies still persisted in literary imagination.⁴⁰ One of Prester John's final appearances of the sixteenth century was in George Abbot's *Description of the Whole Worlde* (1599), later to become the Archbishop of Canterbury. But the legend continued into the seventeenth century; in

³⁶ Rachewiltz, 'Prester John', 67.

³⁷ Clarence Augustus Manning, 'Prester John and Japan', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 42 (1922), 286-294, 289, 292.

³⁸ Rachewiltz, 'Prester John', 69.

³⁹ Gerda Brunnlechner, 'The so-called Genoese World Map of 1457: A Stepping Stone Towards Modern Cartography?',

Peregrinations, Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture, IV, 1, (Spring 2013), 56-80, 76-8.

⁴⁰ Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Beyond Babel', in Natalie Zemon Davis and Timothy Hampton, *Confronting the Turkish Dogs: Rabelais and His Critics*, Occasional Paper no. 10, 1996, Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, Berkeley, 15-28, 17.

1605, Guerreiro still believed that the real Prester John was 'the Emperor of Catayo' and in 1693, Philippe Avril linked Prester John with the Dalai Lama.⁴¹

5 Discussion: Seeing the Prester Globally

The legend of Prester John demonstrates the continuance of old notions into early modern Europe—the impact of renaissance explorations on classical geographic formulations notwithstanding—and strategic compulsions that were braided into the classical imaginary geographies, these varying according to time and space.

The legend carried a strong political message. The writing of geography involves politics: imperial geographical exploration connotes knowledge about nature and the physical realm while the representation of mythical lands in many cases involves the understanding of one state's prospects in relation to others' and written material inspires future explorations. Prester John's realm shifted, as European explorations discovered new lands and the 'Indies' continuously changed contours. The invention of the 'Christian Indies' represented in the letter of Prester John transcended regional differences along with the age of discovery, because the real realm as described in the letters was full of uncertain characteristics, the landscape depicted was imaginary, containing the earthly paradise and the magical fountain of youth.⁴²

And yet, the legend's strategic imperatives cannot be discounted. Just as he was placed in different locations, Prester John had different roles to enact over time. Although sometimes identified with Kublai Khan, he was also seen as enemy of the Mongols; he was depicted as continuing the Alexandrine project of enclosing the Tartars. At other times, he was a Christian ally against Muslims. If the Mongols invented the Prester, then they correctly read the implications of Islamic expansion unto their gates and, once they sold the legend to the West, the importance of the legend became imbricated with the Islamic advance into Byzantium that ultimately ceded to the nightmare of disorder that was visible in the European enlightenment.

In 1494 Pero da Covilhã became the first European to document a meeting with the legendary Prester John who, as it turned out, was actually named King Eskender. The expedition of Pero da Covilhã was thus both an apex—contact had been made with Prester John and a nadir—since the powerful potentate of European lore had turned out to be the relatively inconsequential feudal ruler of an isolated African highland region.⁴³ The legend waned in the mid-sixteenth century with Portuguese accounts of Prester John's descent into insanity and moral darkness; echoing Conrad's Marlow four centuries later, who saw Kurtz's going native not as a step toward the recovery of a lost paradise but instead as a fall into hell, into the abyss of his own darkness.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Father Fernão Guerreiro, *Jahangir and the Jesuits: With an Account of Benedict Goes and the Mission to Pegu. From the Relations of Father Fernão Guerreiro, SJ*. Translated by CH Paynem, New York: Robert McBride & Company, 1930; Philippe Avril, *Travels into Divers Parts of Europe and Asia, Undertaken by the French King's Order to Discover a New Way by Land Into China. Containing many curious remarks in natural philosophy, geography, hydrography, and history. Together with a description of Great Tartary, and of the different people who inhabit there*. Translated from the First French Edition of 1692. London: Timothy Goodwin, 1693, 154.

⁴² I - Chun Wang, 'Alexander the Great..', 4-6.

⁴³ Brooks, 'Prester John: a reexamination', 118-9.

⁴⁴ Kurt, 'The search for Prester John..', 22; Patrick Brantlinger, 'Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 1, "Race," Writing, and Difference, Autumn, 1985, 166-203, p. 196.

Conclusion

In writing this history of Prester John across multiple worlds, I used the strategies of comparing, connecting, conceptualising, and contextualising, arguing that developments in one or several cases belonged within a larger recurring pattern amidst global developments.⁴⁵

Connectivities were impacted through divergences: if one part of a global system hit upon a development considered advantageous by the rest, they sought to adopt, raid or trade for it, in fact, having little choice if the advantage facilitated dispersal or expansion. Eventually the divergent advantage disseminated to, at the very least, urban clusters within the global system. Thus divergence could create or expand globalised zones and usually led to some convergence, not necessarily homogenisation, until another divergence arose. Great divergences were: 1) the nomadic - horse advantage from 3000 BCE, 2) the expansion of Buddhism between 300 BCE and 400 CE, 3) China and India's textile manufacturing and exports from c. 100 BCE, 4) Islamic expansion, c. 600 CE, 5) the divergence of Latin Europe c. 1400, and 6) the so - called 'great divergence' between Europe and Asia visible c. 1600. In network theory these divergences are referred to as network shift and network change. Global history—comprising comparative, relational, international, transnational, oceanic, global, world and big histories, as well as historical sociology, civilisational analysis, world - systems approach, and the history of globalisation—has been seen as marked by at least five vectors of connectivity: diffusion, outreach, dispersal, expansion and attraction.⁴⁶

I would like to add here a sixth vector of connectivity: imagination. While the strange history of Prester John highlights the strategy of diffusion and also illustrates the power of attraction, a dynamic global figure was nonetheless created simply through imagination, connecting disparate worlds and not only sustaining but changing its role according to exigencies for over five hundred years.

⁴⁵ This scheme is adapted from Diego Olstein, *Thinking History Globally*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

⁴⁶ James Belich, John Darwin, Chris Wickham, 'Introduction', *The Prospect of Global History*, OUP, 2015; Olstein, *Thinking History Globally*; J. B. Jack Owens, 'What Kind of a System is it? The DynCoopNet project as a Tribute to Andre Gunder Frank (1929-2005)', in Rila Mukherjee ed. *Networks in the First Global Age 1400-1800*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2011, 3-9.