

History-Telling about Prester John

The legend of Prester John has been a debated topic in medieval studies ever since the nineteenth century. It is during the twentieth century, however, and especially in recent years, that this subject caught the attention of scholars from other disciplines. They sought to reconstruct the contexts in which the fabulous stories about the patriarch and king of the Indies initially circulated and developed beyond their embryonic cultural and political context. So far, researches on Prester John have been mainly philological and historical in character, albeit Eurocentric in perspective, as they focused on the ‘letters’ that, according to a mid-thirteenth-century retelling, were allegedly sent during the twelfth century by “Presbyter Johannes”, the devout king of the Indies and patriarch of the Nestorian Church, to the four most powerful men of Europe at the time, namely the two emperors of the East and West, along with the French ruler Louis VII, and Pope Alexander III.

The ulterior discovery of several manuscripts, – more than four hundred of them – in different Romance languages and in Hebrew – in addition to nearly a dozen other languages, such as Welsh, English, Irish, Swedish, Serbian, Old Church Slavonic, Danish, Dutch, German, and Russian – dramatically broadened the field of research. It also made scholars abandon the belief in a single original letter, in Latin, on which all the others depended, and granted them the freedom to pursue a battery of interconnected questions. Does Prester John correspond to a historical character and, if so, which one? Did the four powerful addressees actually ever received this kind of documents? Did the letters’ depiction of the kingdom of the Indies follow literary heritage of the past or did they emulate utopian ideals inspired by the contemporary *Zeitgeist*? Did the readers of the Prester John stories really believe in his existence? Were the travelers who reported stories about Prester John inspired by real places and people of faraway lands? Did the wonders attributed to Prester John’s country correspond to the expectations of a certain literary genre? Or did they represent the amazement of do discovering little known lands along the Silk Road?

The answers these questions generated reveal the functional character of the stories about Prester John in the contexts in which they circulated; as a result, new themes took the limelight, to the exclusion of others. Beginning with the 1980s, scholars undertook closest analyses of the authors behind the various versions of the letters and of their multiple rewritings. In doing this, they sought to identify the alter egos of Prester John throughout the periods in which this figure is said to have been ‘encountered’ on journeys to the East. This approach has led to the development of a multidisciplinary strand of works on Prester John, ranging from investigations on different twelfth-cen-

tury contexts – when stories about him began to circulate – to the eighteenth century, when the Spanish Benedictine Benito Jerónimo Feijoo y Montenegro (1676-1764) wrote some *Reflexiones sobre la historia* about historical mistakes and truths underpinning these mistakes. In a section about Prester John, he concluded that such a character never existed¹.

Current research on Prester John shows mostly a penchant for documentary investigation, as it seeks to reconstitute the narrative paths of the legend from the initial hearsay about this ruler among the high ranks of an European society already haunted, both by conflicts between religious and political powers and by the threat of invading armies of the East, to his quest in the era of the great voyages to the East along the new trade routes. The said narrative paths also included Prester John's relocation to Christian Ethiopia, via Portuguese contact, and his way back to Asia, where the figure of the Dalai Lama met the expectations of the model patriarch and sovereign of medieval memory. This recent panorama of research on Prester John lacks, however, closest analyses of the material and emotional dimension of the stories about this legendary figure. Rich in fantastic and utopian elements, these Prester John narratives, as opposed to recent scholarly narratives, provide clues both about unexplored encounters between Europe and Asia and about the collective memory created in their background. Going beyond Prester John as a historical or legendary character, stories about him are set in landscapes inhabited with variable objects, places and people. In these fluctuant scenarios, Prester John is said to have been met, seen, sought, lost, killed, remembered, simply mentioned, as an old man or a young boy in the appearance. Therefore, new vistas of research could open through the exploration of the scenographic set which gives sense to the fantastic narratives about the patriarch and king called Prester John².

1. *Historicizing*

Several kinds of sources mention or describe the figure of Prester John: diplomatic documents, travel accounts, and literary works from the beginning of the thirteenth century to the modern age, written during the age of travels around Asia and Africa. Such an heterogenous collection of data immediately conveys the challenges historians face in reconstructing possible trajectories of the stories about Prester John. Mixes between fabulous narratives and historical data are easily classified as legends, turning research into the fuzzy

¹ «Sería bueno que se anden rompiendo la cabeza los escritores, y escudriñando todos los rincones del orbe en busca del preste Juan, y que acaso no exista ni haya existido jamas tal preste Juan en el mundo; por lo ménos, el que no existe ahora lo tengo por muy verisímil, porque en las relaciones modernas que he visto no encontré tal noticias, siendo así que sería dignísima de la curiosidad y advertencia de los viajeros» (*Obras escogidas del padre fray Benito Jerónimo Feijoo y Montenegro, ... con una noticia de su vida y juicio crítico de sus escritos*, M. Rivadeneyra, Madrid 1863, § xxxvii).

² Alternate Names for Prester John are Presbyter Iohannes, Patriarch John, King John, Prete Iane, Prete Ianni, Presto Giovanni, Preste Juan, Preste Joam, Preste-Jean, Prestre Johan, Presbytero-Johanides, Tsar-Priest John, Prete Ianne, Prester Cohan, Johannes Africanus, Bel Gian, Praeciosus Iohannes, Preste Ioam, Belul Jan, Jonanam, Presbyter Bedigian, Prestigian, Precious John (I thank Christopher E. Taylor for help in longer the list).

bricolage of cultural elements. References about Prester-John-like figures, however, lead researchers into other directions, such as Jewish and Islamic literary contexts, and accounts in the Greek tradition about the wonders of the East. They transport their readers from the depths of the steppe to the heights of Tibet; they also take them across the fluid borders of Mediterranean and above the Europe's battlefields.

Research about this strange figure entails the distinction between at least two orders of questions. On the one hand, there is the scriptural genealogy of sources attesting the name of the *Presbyter Johannes* (with its many linguistic variants) or the king of the Eastern (probably, both Syrian, Coptic, and Nestorian) Christians. On the other hand, there is a wide net of references about a Christian king that has been located in Asia, then in Africa, who appears and disappears in various landscapes; who is regarded as a friend of the Christians but who does not arrive when they are in need; an Eastern king who claims to teach the Western Christian rulers how to keep the peace and prosperity but has never been reached by any of them. Nonetheless, available sources provide enough data to draw the portrait of this legendary king. But the attempts to identify the historical characters who could have provided the inspiration for Prester John, or his descendants, so far amounted to questionable arguments and have not been unanimously accepted by the historians³.

Some scholars have tried to identify analogies between the descriptions of *Presbyter Johannes* and those of historical figures, such as the king of the Öngüt in Mongolia, the Buddhist ruler of Qara Khitai (Yeh-lü Da-shih), or the King of Syria (Yūhannā al-mū'min malik Sūriyah), by providing the reconstruction of the process through which the "West" forged, translated from a language into another, and interpreted itself by forging, translating, and interpreting the "East".

Since we cannot exclude the possibility that these historical characters were regarded by their contemporaries as personifications of the legendary Oriental ruler known for centuries under the guise of Prester John, it is a matter of fact that – as Father Feijoo showed – no Prester John could have been genuinely found. No one bearing this name sent his army to support the Christians in the fight against the Muslims and the Mongols. Prester John has been merely *talked about*.

What the historical research has provided is the real absence, the non-existence of *true* Prester Johns among the real actors of the Crusades, in the travels to East, at the failed diplomatic encounters with potential allies beyond the Christian lands. In this sense, the available historical data support both the conclusion that Prester John is a fictional figure never to have existed, and the supposition that memories about important historical rulers shaped the portrait of plausible allies in faraway lands. But even more important is the real material historical impact created out of this absence⁴.

³ Cf., for a survey, J. Pirenne, *La légende du Prêtre Jean*, Presses Universitaires, Strasbourg 1992; A.M.A. Sheir, *The Prester John Legend Between East and West During the Crusades. Entangled Eastern-Latin Mythical Legacies*, Trivent, Budapest 2022, pp. 9-36.

⁴ I thank Christopher E. Taylor for remarking this point.

However, while we need to restrict ourselves to historical evidence in speaking about Prester John as a historical character, there is another kind of evidence which deserves scholarly attention. This is the role that the narratives about Prester John have played over the centuries. The fact that Prester John *has been talked about* for centuries remains of a paramount interest to scholars.

Western missionaries and diplomats reached new and dangerous lands in their search for new political and economic alliances. They also talked about these places, widely crossed by European pilgrims, merchants, and captives, as the lands where Prester John dwelled. As Charles F. Beckingham posited,

«[i]t is a common mistake to assume that no accurate knowledge of Asia or sub-Saharan Africa was available in late medieval or Renaissance Europe. In fact there was a great deal known about not only the Near East, but Central Asia, China, India and Ethiopia, though less about Japan and South-East Asia. The difficulty which confronted scholars or statesmen who needed such information was not that there was none, but that it was so difficult to distinguish which information was trustworthy»⁵.

The question whether these people truly believed that such a king ruled those lands does not change the theoretical and historical value of these journeys and the texts and alliances these journeys produced. Scholarly attempts to demonstrate that historical primary sources borrowed literary tropes both from previous traditions and the mediaeval imagery about the East does not diminish the historical relevance the portrait of the good Christian king of the East has played for centuries.

The initial circulation of the Prester John stories, during the twelfth century, accompanied a strong need to fictionalize Christianity beyond the boundaries of the Holy Roman Empire, across the unknown territories of the Silk Roads⁶. This Christian desideratum met the Europeans' yearning of finding something familiar where everything seemed to be different: Prester John was a safe point of reference where the Mongols did not behave like the Christian warriors, the Mongol women did not behave like the Christians wives, and the warriors did not fight like the Western ones. The violent side of the alliance with Mongols was not easy to accept from the point of view of the Europeans and the memories about their cruelty lasted for a long time.

In such a scenario, the stories about Prester John provide significant insights to rethink the events related to the Crusades, as well as the effects of traumatic events that marked the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, such as the battle of Qatwān (1141), the fall of Edessa (1144), the capture of Damietta (1219) and the fall of Acre (1291)⁷.

⁵ C.F. Beckingham, *The Quest for Prester John*, in F. Fernández-Armesto (ed.), *The European opportunity*, Variorum, Aldershot 1995, pp. 175-194: 178-179.

⁶ Cf. F.M. Rogers, *Quest for Eastern Christians: Travels and Rumor in the Age of Discovery*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1962.

⁷ Cf. A.M.A. Sheir, *The Prester John Legend Between East and West*, cit., *infra*; A. Musarra, *Acri 1291. La caduta degli stati crociati*, il Mulino, Bologna 2017; Id., *Il crepuscolo della Crociata*, il Mulino, Bologna 2018.

2. *Re-Telling*

Of a man called Johannes, who is *rex et sacerdos*, Otto of Freising wrote for the first time in his *Chronicon* of 1145 (*Otonis episcopi frisingensis Chronica, liber VII, 33*), where it is stated that this Johannes, Christian but Nestorian, lived *in ultra Persidem et Armeniam in extremo oriente*. The historical episode that established the figure of Prester John as a ‘real’ personage, acting of his own will, is the circulation of an open letter that Prester John is said to have sent to Manuel I Komnenos, Emperor of Byzantium. Writing a century later, Alberic de Trois-Fontaines placed the origins of this letter in 1165. Its sender introduces himself as Prester John and describes himself as a ruler and priest governing a kingdom located in the East Indies, as the head of the Eastern community qualified as “Nestorian”.

Alberic de Trois-Fontaines also reports that, around the same time (1260s-70s), three other letters were sent, in addition to the initial missive, respectively to Pope Alexander III, King Louis VII of France, and Frederick I Barbarossa, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. According to the first witnesses, while, there were four letters ‘officially’ sent to some of the powerful rulers of Europe, hundreds of manuscripts survived, whose paleographic dating is mainly concentrated in the twelfth century. These manuscripts, in a rich variety of Romance languages, constituted, for many years, the focus of scholarly attention in the search for a possible historical filiation. The initial conclusion, now outdated, held that there was one original letter, namely the one in Latin intended for Frederick I Barbarossa, from which all the others derived⁸.

Over the twentieth century, the ‘historical’ documents uncovered and analysed have multiplied to include letters presumably dated between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, leading scholars to reconsider the initial data and hypotheses. Some have ruled out the existence of a real Prester John and explored the texts in an allegorical or utopian sense⁹. Others have attempted to reconstruct various ramifications of the manuscripts, leaving out the Latin copy as a ‘historical forgery’. In fact, the Latin letter addressed to Manuel I Komnenos seems to be a translation that Bishop Christian of Mainz made, not without additions, at the behest of the emperor of the East, in order to render its contents understandable to Latin speakers, and more specifically to the emperor of the West¹⁰. However, no historical data indicate that there was an orig-

⁸ F. Zarncke, *Der Priester Johannes, Erste Abhandlung enthaltend Capitel I, II und III*, in *Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Classe der Königl. Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften*, Bd. VII, n. 8, S. Hirzel, Leipzig 1879, pp. 827-1030.

⁹ L. Olschki, *Der Brief des Presbyters Johannes*, in «Historische Zeitschrift» 144, 1 (1931), pp. 1-14; M. Letts, *Prester John. Sources and Illustrations*, in «Notes & Queries» 188 (1945), pp. 178-180; U. Monneret De Villard, *Le leggende orientali sui Magi evangelici*, Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1952; K.F. Helleiner, *Prester John's Letter: A Medieval Utopia*, in «Phoenix» 13, 2 (1959), pp. 47-57; M. Gosman, *La lettre du Prêtre Jean: les versions en ancien français et en ancien occitan, textes et commentaires*, Bouma's Boekhuis, Groningen 1982; H. Franco, *La construction d'une utopie: l'Empire de Prêtre Jean*, in «Journal of Medieval History» 23, 3 (1997), pp. 211-225.

¹⁰ V. Slessarev, *Prester John: The Letter and the Legend*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1959.

inal ‘Greek’ letter addressed to the Byzantine emperor on which the Latin one depends. According to Vsevolod Slessarev, the alleged translation is a genuine ‘fake’ motivated by anti-papal and pro-imperial political sentiments¹¹.

The discovery of new copies in Latin, of other letters in various Romance languages and in Hebrew, all dated to around the twelfth century, challenged the initial search for the ‘original’ letter on which all others depended¹². According to the now largely accepted working hypothesis, the four ‘official’ letters, addressed to the four potentates of Christendom, and their coeval translations are independent documents that nevertheless share a common political and cultural background. According to Jacqueline Pirenne, some linguistic and stylistic choices in the letters suggest a Jewish cultural context in Provence¹³. Following this avenue of research highlights the similarities between the description of the kingdom of Prester John and the journey of the Jew Eldad around an ideal kingdom, as narrated in the *Book of Eldad the Danite (Sēfer Eldād)*¹⁴. Let us put aside, for a moment, the interpretation of Prester John both as a patriarch with temporal powers and a king with spiritual powers. Following the above hypothesis, we could regard the *Sēfer Eldād* as a work written in Hebrew that, according to some scholars, probably inspired a Jewish man of letters to send a missive to the rulers of Christendom, with the intention of carrying covert polemics against the powerful men of Europe, while using as a stock character who was sovereign, Indian, Nestorian and anti-Muslim¹⁵. But why all these characteristics together?

Historians who have become fascinated with the figure of Prester John have tried to reconstruct the intrigues that may have tied together the letters addressed to the four potentates and the European geopolitical chessboard¹⁶. Friedrich Zarncke demonstrated that in the first two decades of the twelfth century, the figure of an Indian ruler had already been the subject of rumors in Europe. An Indian patriarch visiting Pope Calixtus II is mentioned in *De Adventu Patriarchae Indorum* (1122-23) and the news is confirmed by Abbot Odo of Reims in the *Epistle ad Thomam comitem de quodam miraculo sancti Thomae apostoli* sent to Thomas de Marle, Lord of Coucy (and participant in the First Crusade)¹⁷. This could explain why Alexander III, theoretically the recipient of one of the four ‘official’ letters, sent a missive to *Johanni* ‘king of

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² E. Ullendorfe - C.F. Beckingham, *The Hebrew Letters of Prester John*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1982; B. Wagner, *Die «Epistola presbiteri Johannis»: lateinisch und deutsch. Überlieferung, Textgeschichte, Rezeption und Übertragungen im Mittelalter. Mit bisher unedierte Texten*, Niemeyer, Tübingen 2000; K. Brewer, *Prester John: The Legend and Its Sources*, Routledge, London 2015.

¹³ J. Pirenne, *La légende du Prêtre Jean*, cit.

¹⁴ D. Wasserstein, *Eldad ha-Dani and Prester John*, in C.F. Beckingham - B. Hamilton (eds.), *Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes*, Variorum, Aldershot 1996, pp. 213-36.

¹⁵ E. Ullendorfe - C.F. Beckingham, *The Hebrew Letters of Prester John*, cit.; B. Hamilton, *Prester John and the Three Kings of Cologne*, in C.F. Beckingham - B. Hamilton (eds.), *Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes*, cit., pp. 171-85; J. Pirenne, *La légende du Prêtre Jean*, cit..

¹⁶ B. Hamilton, *Prester John and the Three Kings of Cologne*, cit.; G. Zaganelli, *Le lettere del Prete Gianni. Di un falso e delle sue verità*, in «Fälschungen im Mittelalter» 5 (1988), pp. 243-260.

¹⁷ F. Zarncke, *Der Priester Johannes*, cit.

the Indies' in 1177, in which he addressed him as *Karissimo in Christo Filio Johanni, illustri et magnifico Indorum regi*¹⁸.

However, it has recently been noted that we have no certainty that Alexander III actually received the letter, nor that his missive was a reply to a previous letter from Prester John¹⁹. The version according to which Alexander III replied to Prester John depends on the version of events that became widespread among medieval *chronica* writers, a version that has been consistently told and repeated in this way for centuries. Therefore, although many scholars of the Prester John dossier take for granted that Alexander III replied to the letter he received, we have no data to confirm such a correspondence, nor do we have any information about the outcome of the missive. We know, however, that Alexander III's letter offered the King of the Indies the chance of a Catholic education and that it extended the favor of sanctioning the Indian ruler's loyalty to Christianity by his reply in a sealed letter²⁰.

The complexity of the geopolitical scene after 1150s increases when one considers the alliance between the Papacy and the great kingdoms of Europe and their connections to the Third Crusade, whose events directly involved the Muslim sovereigns who contended for control over Syria and Egypt, thus undermining the Christianity of Edessa and Jerusalem. These events belong to the history of Islam in Central Asia, whose highlights include the defeat of the Seljuk Turks under the advance of the Mongols, and, in Egypt, the clashes between Shiites and Sunnis that saw the rise of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn²¹.

As for the history of religious contacts, the Prester John letters and the stories about his reign are full of clues that open the investigation to heuristic revisions about the presence of Christianity in Asia, the influences of the Islamic culture throughout the Mediterranean, and the mingling of religions along the trade routes that increasingly and irreversibly joined Asia, Europe and the Mediterranean. The stories about Prester John become sources to explore religious contact if we consider the interaction with Prester John as a clue of exchange or clash. From this perspective, the figure of Prester John acts in the narratives as a symbolic device, whose purpose is to render contact with otherness and the unknown intelligible. Through the mediation of the Prester John figure, the narrative extols the virtues of an Oriental ruler and Nestorian patriarch and the prosperities of his wide-ranging reign, that enshrined in a church the relics of the apostle Thomas, to whom early Christian texts attribute the spread of Christianity in India²². Furthermore, in the 'official' letters, Prester John promises military aid to Christians, evidently the Crusaders, against Muslims. In other sources, he is also described in his

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ K. Brewer, *Prester John: The Legend and Its Sources*, cit., p. 11.

²⁰ F. Zarncke, *Der Priester Johannes*, cit.

²¹ R. Conte, *Il leggendario Prete Gianni tra Oriente e Occidente*, in «Orientalia Parthenopea» 11 (2011), pp. 31-62; K. Brewer, *Prester John: The Legend and Its Sources*, cit., *infra*; A. Knobler, *Mythology and Diplomacy in the Age of Exploration*, Brill, Leiden 2017.

²² C. Dognini - I. Ramelli, *Gli apostoli in India nella patristica e nella letteratura sanscrita*, Medusa, Milano 2001; R.E. Frykenberg, *Christianity in India : from beginnings to the present*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008.

marriage alliances with the Mongols, in the battles in which he lost his life, among the unusual Christian presence held in slavery by the Muslims. These elements make more sense in the light of international relations in the Mediterranean, where in addition to the princes of Christendom and their allies, representatives of Shia Islam (the Fatimids) and Sunni Islam (under the command of Nūr ad-Dīn, later Ṣalāh al-Dīn) intervened to conquer Egypt, and in Asia where the “boundary between the Mongols and Muslim-held lands”²³ change after the death of Genghis Khan.

If the letters provide useful data to reinterpret the events of the second half of the twelfth century, Prester John tales go beyond the specific purpose of these accounts. In this case, Prester John becomes a symbolic character who appears in texts far from the events of the twelfth century but who still upholds the urge to ground the present in the past: for the success of the Nestorian community in Asia after Nestorius’ expulsion from Edessa in the fifth century; for the apostolic desire to find the fruits of Thomas’ work in India; for the Christians’ feeling of superiority over the Muslims; for the crusaders’ ambition to liberate Edessa and Jerusalem from the Muslims.

In the thirteenth century, from the Muslim perspective, the contact points were Jerusalem²⁴, Ethiopia²⁵, and India²⁶. The economic and political importance of these three places shaped the Islamic narratives about the role of Prester John in the advance of the Sunnis toward the Mediterranean. It also highlighted his displacement in the changing relationships between the Muslim and Christian Ethiopians and the Europeans. The same triad, Jerusalem-Ethiopia-India shaped the stories about Prester John in the relationships between the Muslims and the Portuguese in the African trade during the fifteenth century. Similarly, the Islamic imagery about the wonders of the East²⁷ shifted the geographical and symbolic boundaries in the Islamic travel writing and the reception of the travels of the Jewish Eldad in the Islamic diplomacy²⁸.

From a Jewish point of view, the leading Prester John narratives focus on the search for the tribes of Israel in the East and in Ethiopia and on the Jewish communities in Europe. The Jewish sources suggest the interest in the cohabitation between Christians and Jews in the Christian kingdoms through

²³ Cl. Taylor, *The Production of Knowledge and Preservation of Self-identity: William of Rubruck and Ibn Battuta in Contact with Mongols*, in Ch. Mueller - M. Salonia (eds.), *Travel Writings on Asia: Curiosity, Identities, and Knowledge Across the East, c. 1200 to the Present*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore 2022, pp. 29-57: 31.

²⁴ A. Knobler, *Mythology and Diplomacy in the Age of Exploration*, cit.

²⁵ P. Schneider, *L’Éthiopie et l’Inde: interférences et confusions aux extrémités du monde antique (VII^e siècle avant J.-C. - VI^e siècle après J.-C.)*, École française de Rome, Roma 2004; G. Fiacadori, *Un re di Nubia a Costantinopoli nel 1203*, in «Scrinium» 1 (2005), pp. 43-49; C. Rouxpetel, «Indiens, Éthiopiens et Nubiens» dans les récits de pèlerinage occidentaux: entre altérité constatée et altérité construite (XII^e-XIV^e siècles), in «Annales d’Ethiopie» 27 (2012), pp. 71-90.

²⁶ A. Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu’au milieu du 11^e siècle*, vol. 1, Mouton, Paris 1967.

²⁷ S. Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2009.

²⁸ A. Miquel, *La géographie humaine*, cit.

the stories of the travels of the Jewish Eldād in Europe and the interest in the cohabitation between Jews and Muslims in the caliphates. The stories about Jews in Asia dealt specifically with Khazaria, a strategic point where passed the river routes from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea and where traders passed on their way toward North and West²⁹.

The Christian sources related to the Prester John figure describe various forms of antagonism towards Islam, through characters who are said to interact with the Christian ruler of the Indies, that continues to be place of ancient wonders³⁰. Alongside the Muslims, other real or imaginary actors of the political and religious scene appear in conjunction with Prester John. These are the inhabitants of Central Asia who are depicted with their factions, their wars, their military and cultural peculiarities; the inhabitants of South and South-East Asia are illustrated through their trade and their 'oddities'.

The myth-making process about the kingdom of Prester John, located in an undefined part of the East, was taken for granted in its own factuality throughout the following centuries, finding room in the so-called medieval travel literature: from the *Historia Mongalorum* (1245-1247) by Giovanni da Pian del Carpine to *Book of the Travels of Marco Polo* (13th century), to the *Liber peregrinationis* by Ricold of Monte Croce (c. 1299-1300), to the *Pilgrimage* of Odoric of Pordenone (14th century), with a peak of Hellenistic exoticism, among others, in the *Book of John Mandeville* (14th century) traceable to the corpus of the *Alexander Romance*³¹.

3. Feeling

The stories around the figure of Prester John provide a changing political background between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries, involving the Mediterranean, Eurasian routes and the Franco-Mongolian alliance against the Mamluks³², and religious and political relations with Ethiopia and Nubia³³. The narrative developments around the places, virtues and wonders of the kingdom of Prester John indicate the changes in the context of production and reception of the stories. They also show discrepancies that serve as clues to investigate the political and religious function this accounts assumed in political alliances,

²⁹ Cf. A. Knobler, *Mythology and Diplomacy in the Age of Exploration*, cit., pp. 96-104.

³⁰ L. Daston - K. Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*, Zone Books, New York 1998; C.-C. Kappler, *Monstres, démons et merveilles à la fin du Moyen âge*, Payot, Paris 1980; J. Le Goff, *L'Occident médiéval et l'Océan Indien: un horizon oniroïque*, in M. Cortelazzo (ed.), *Medierraneo e Oceano Indiano. Atti del VI Colloquio internazionale di storia marittima*, Leo S. Olschki, Firenze 1970, pp. 243-263; J. Baltrušaitis, *Il Medioevo fantastico. Antichità ed esotismi nell'arte gotica (Nuova ed. riv. e ampliata)*, Adelphi, Milano 1988 (or. ed. 1973).

³¹ G. Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*, University Press, Cambridge 1956; R. Stoneman, *Legends of Alexander the Great*, J.M. Dent, London 1994.

³² A. Musarra, *Il crepuscolo della crociata*, cit.

³³ G. Fiaccadori, *Un re di Nubia a Costantinopoli*, cit.; M. Salvatore, *The Ethiopian Age of Exploration: Prester John's Discovery of Europe, 1306-1458*, in «Journal of World History» 21, 4 (2011), pp. 593-627; A. Kurt, *The search for Prester John, a projected crusade and the eroding prestige of Ethiopian kings, c.1200-c.1540*, in «Journal of Medieval History» 39, 3 (2013), pp. 297-320.

in cartography³⁴ and in the symbolic horizon of medieval ‘orientalisms’ of Hellenistic, Jewish, Islamic, and Christian expressions.

Between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries, the Eurasian continent witnessed major cultural shifts that provoked new religious contacts and new forms of intentional or forced cohabitation. This took place as a result of the pressures the Ottomans exercised in the Mediterranean and following the unprecedented experience of the Mongol troops, which severely destabilised the classical imaginary about *Oriens* and the topographies of Paradise connected to it³⁵. Nevertheless, the expansion of trade contacts between Asia and Europe was so important that it did not discourage travelers from pursuing them. On the contrary, trade contacts rather oriented travelers, outlining new viable routes and new frontiers of coexistence. Thus, while the Mongol advance into Eastern Europe sewed terror among Christian troops, parallel commercial explorations pushed beyond the known East, beyond the dreaded borders populated by Gog and Magog. In these changing scenarios, the figure of Prester John is a beacon in the darkness: he acts as a symbolic device, an ethical and psychological remedy for the anxieties dictated by the new religious and geopolitical scenarios that are about to consolidate in the heart of Europe, in the Mediterranean and on the trade routes towards Asia.

Prester John remained in the East with his army of Christians and his riches. He was searched for and, according to some accounts, found: Travelers to Central Asia identified him with some Mongolian princes who fought the Turks. Possibly Nestorian, possibly Buddhist, these princely enemies of the Turks and infidels appeared as further embodiments of Prester John himself, likely understood as his descendants or kin³⁶. Religious contacts have produced not only anxieties but also expectations, which first the Muslims of the Mediterranean, then the Mongols have disproved, with the effect of seeing the figure of Prester John move further and further south of the Indian Ocean, as far as Ethiopia was drawn in the old conception of India. Between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, in this partially explored part of Africa, Prester John found a place of choice since it was in Ethiopia that Christianity had an important foothold, building fruitful contacts between Christian Africa and the city of Jerusalem³⁷.

The literary figure of Prester John also brought along to Ethiopia the kingdom of wonders, importing the scenario previously attributed to India. This perspective persisted until Ethiopia began to be marked on maps no longer

³⁴ M.J. Ramos, *Ensaio de Mitologia Cristã: o Preste João e a Reversibilidade Simbólica*, Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa 1997; E. Edson, *The World Map, 1300-1492: The Persistence of Tradition and Transformation*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2007; M.E. Brooks, *Visual representations of Prester John and his kingdom*, in «Quidditas» 35 (2014), pp. 147-176.

³⁵ A. Scafi, *Il paradiso in terra: mappa del giardino dell'Eden*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2007; J. Valtrová, *Beyond the Horizons of Legends: Traditional Imagery and Direct Experience in Medieval Accounts of Asia*, in «Numen» 57 (2010), pp. 154-185.

³⁶ Cf. I. de Rachewiltz, *Prester John and Europe's Discovery of East Asia*, Australian National University Press, Canberra 1972.

³⁷ M. Salvatore, *African Prester John and the Birth of Ethiopian-European Relations, 1402-1555*, Routledge, Abingdon 2016.

separated from India only by the Nile, but as its own country. Once Ethiopia finds its correct place on the map of Europe, as a geographic reality of its own, with its native African inhabitants, the figure Prester John is displaced again and reappears on Portuguese maps of the early sixteenth century, in the lands of Nubia, and endowed with African features³⁸. Since this point onwards, the stories about Prester John often resemble fables, so much so that over the sixteenth century some authors mention his “letter” as a pseudo-epistle and question its authorship if not its existence³⁹. It is interesting that there is also a post-sixteenth century return to historical belief in Prester John. The geographical markings for the kingdom of Prester John continued to appear on maps until the eighteenth century⁴⁰. In other words, the shift from real belief to absolute disbelief is not linear.

The stories about Prester John did not lose their meaning between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries. They were instead modified, first by dislocating the kingdom of Prester John from India to Africa – two territories which, for centuries, were conceived by Europeans as united within the *mare clausum*⁴¹ of medieval memory. While the Indian Ocean was not enclosed in the Islamic maps since the twelfth century⁴², in Europe it was only at the end of the fifteenth century that the cartographer Heinrich Hammer first drew an open Indian Ocean⁴³. The same kingdom moved then from Africa to Asia – when Tibet was configured in Europe as the land of Prester John⁴⁴.

From a demystifying approach, in 1667, Athanasius Kircher suggested that the ingenuity of the Portuguese was the main reason for misplacing Prester John in 15th-century Africa – when the diplomat Pêro da Covilhã, at the service of João II of Portugal⁴⁵, thought that the Abyssinian king, called in the local language «Juchanes Belul, id est, pretiosum Joannem»⁴⁶, was the *true* Prester John whose many statesmen and historians discussed at that time. Kircher’s argumentation was based on Joseph Juste Scaliger’s analysis of the

³⁸ Cf. C.F. Beckingham, *The Quest for Prester John*, in C.F. Beckingham - B. Hamilton (eds.), *Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes*, cit., pp. 272 ff.; M.J. Ramos, *Um mundo de contrários: Preste João/Negusa Negast*, in «Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa» 109, 7-12 (1991), pp. 61-70.

³⁹ Cf. B. Wagner, *Die «Epistola presbiteri Johannis»*, cit.; K. Brewer, *Prester John: The Legend and Its Sources*, cit.

⁴⁰ K. Brewer, *Prester John: The Legend and Its Sources*, cit., *infra*.

⁴¹ J. Le Goff, *L'Occident médiéval et l'Océan Indien*, cit.

⁴² M. Tolmacheva, *The Indian Ocean in Arab Geography*, in «Terra Brasilis» 6 (2015), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/terrabrasilis.1585>.

⁴³ J. Brotton, *A History of the World in Twelve Maps*, Penguin Books, London 2013.

⁴⁴ Athanasii Kircheri e Soc. Jesu, *China monumentis qua sacris qua profanis, nec non variis naturae & artis spectaculis, aliarumque rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata*, Apud Jacobum a Meurs, Astelodami 1667, Pars II, Caput I, p. 48: «Atque circa hoc Regnum Belor, antiquam scilicet Sacarum stationem, Thebeth principale Presbyteri Joannis in Cathaio Regnum situm essetum Geographus Arabs, tum tractatus אדם עולם ארצות dictus R. Abraham Pizol clarè demonstrant».

⁴⁵ Pêro da Covilhã’s arrival in Ethiopia is told in Francisco Alvares, *Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Índias, nova edição (conforme a de 1540 ilustrada de diversos fac-similes)*, Imprensa Nacional, Lisboa 1883. Historically, an earlier attestation of Prester John in Africa appears in the 14th-century nautical portolan chart by Giovanni da Carignano.

⁴⁶ Athanasii Kircheri e Soc. Jesu, *China monumentis*, cit., p. 50.

linguistic borrowing from the Persian⁴⁷ *pādišāh firištānī* (that he transliterated as «Padischa Prestigiani», that is, literally ‘King Prestigiani’) into Arabic *Malik al-Rasūlī* and Ethiopian *Negus* «havarjavi» and his attempt to explain these terms as «Religionis Christianae defensor» and «Rex Apostolicus»⁴⁸. Following Scaliger and Kircher, some decades later, the French Jesuit Philippe Avril, returned to the topic to make a point of the Portuguese “mistake” and conclude that Tibet was ruled by a *rex et sacerdos* in the person of the Dalai Lama⁴⁹.

Despite the geographical mobility of the kingdom of Prester John, its myth-making activity did not lose its aspirational features due to the hope that this patriarch was a steadfast ally of Christianity, but continued to nourish the imaginary of peaceful cohabitation between religions in a geopolitical space that was perceived by travelers as constantly unstable.

4. Re-Exploring

In 2020, a research group at the Sapienza University of Rome undertook to explore the transcultural aspects of the stories of Prester John from the twelfth to the eighteenth century and analyze the functions of the key episodes associated with this figure. The project *Oggetti, abitanti e luoghi nelle storie sul Prete Gianni: aspetti transculturali ed emozionali di un mito plurisecolare tra coabitazione e contatti religiosi (secoli XII-XVI)* [Objects, inhabitants and places in stories about Prester John: transcultural and emotional aspects of a centuries-old myth between cohabitation and religious contacts (12th-16th centuries)] was funded by Sapienza and started in 2021, under my direction. We waited confidently hoping in the possibility to meet in person. The choice was not so wrong because it gave us opportunity to meet and involve other scholars in the project, united by the interest in exploring the stories on Prester John from interconnected perspectives and approaches. I discovered that many scholars have wanted to engage seriously in this topic, but it never felt like the right time.

Despite the pandemic restrictions, the project continued to develop thanks to the participation of additional scholars from different disciplines who be-

⁴⁷ There are many reasons to think that Persian was a *lingua franca* even in Mongol Asia. See D. Morgan, *Persian as a Lingua Franca in the Mongol Empire*, in B. Spooner - W.L. Hanaway (eds.), *Literacy in the Persianate World: Writing and the Social Order*, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia 2012, pp. 160-170.

⁴⁸ Joseph Juste Scaliger, *Opus de emendatione temporum*, typis Roverianis, Coloniae 1629, *Lib. VII: In compvtvm æthiopicvm*, p. 679.

⁴⁹ Philippe Avril, *Voyage en divers Etats d'Europe et d'Asia entrepris pour decouvrir un nouveau chemin à la Chine. Contenant plusieurs remarques curieuses de Physique, de Geographie, d'Hydrographie & d'Histoire, avec un description de la grande Tartarie, & des differents peuples qui l'habitent*, Jean Boudot, Paris 1693, p. 153 «Il paroît par tout ce que je viens de dire du Royaume de Tanchut que le Dalaé-Lama est sans contredit ce fameux Preste-Jean dont le Historiens ont écrit si diuersement. En effet, puisque'on ne peut appliquer plus juste à personne qu'à luy, tout ce que les differents Auteurs en ont dit, il est bien plus naturel de le reconnoître dans certe contrée de l'Asie où il a toujours été, que de l'aller chercher dans l'Abyssiniem où il ne fut jamais».

came passionate about this issue: historians, philologists, historians of religions, anthropologists, and art historians put their expertise at disposal to refresh the state of the art about Prester John and the reception of the stories about the failed encounter between him and the Christians who sought him out.

The enlarged research group discussed a number of methodological questions that try to go beyond the historicity of Prester John and that deal with the ‘mythical’ character of his retelling: can we examine the stories about Prester John as medieval myths? If yes, how should we use the category of myth outside the ancient context where the term arose? What about the role of the extra-human factor that has been ‘selected’ by scholars as specific and meaningful to define the category of myth along the last two centuries of religious studies? What about the narratives that in the Middle Ages and the early modern period impacted historical events bringing together rooted imageries, expectations, and needs to explain and resemanticize reality? What about the narratological practices to project the present into the future taking as a foundational background the collative memory, overlapping layers of heritage, whose result cannot be reduced to one single tradition or religious context? I suggest that these practices require to be re-located through the ramification and points of contact among different chains of telling and hearing.

Moving from such methodological questions, the purpose of rethinking the stories of Prester John as a medieval or early modern myth or legend requires a close dialogue among disciplines, through the involvement of different expertises going across different questions and different ways to give answers.

The research group approached the issue from a multidisciplinary perspective which brings together the history of Europe and Asia and wide-ranging historical-religious research, with specific competences able to explore the different components of the Christian world (Catholic, Orthodox, Syriac Coptic) in the Mediterranean and Asia, the influences of the classical world on medieval and renaissance imagery, the specificities within the history of Islam between the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, and the peculiarities of the religions of Asia and the imagery that constructed and reproduced the notion of “Orient” in the encounter between objects, places and people of the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and of different parts of Africa.

The Theme Section “Retelling Prester John” explores the narratives that have arisen around this prismatic figure from a cross-fertilization of knowledge and methodologies in order to emphasise the places, inhabitants and objects that populate the stories about Prester John. The research team aimed to provide new data to reflect on the religious and political contexts change from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. It is indeed in this time frame that important cultural shifts occur under the effect of crucial historical events and irreversible geographical explorations: a) the construction of a cosmology centred on Jerusalem and the Christian attempt to conquer it by arms and pilgrimages; b) the Ottoman pressures towards the Mediterranean; c) the expansion of European trade towards Asia; d) the advance of the Mongols into eastern Europe and against the Seljuk Turks; e) the geographical explorations

towards the Indian Ocean; f) the European exploration of Africa and the first accounts on African Christian rulers.

In the light of these facts, which impacted the Mediterranean and the contact points between Europe, Asia, and Africa, new religious contacts and new forms of cohabitation became the cause of expectations, new fears, new anxieties, but also of new needs dictated by the increasingly global mode of trade between Asia and Europe via the Mediterranean, in the wake of the ancient memories and reveries that populated the accounts of Alexander the Macedonian's exploits in Asia.

For all these reasons, in order to examine the success of the persistence of the stories about Prester John, research cannot be reduced to the history of a Europe who looks at the rest of the world, but instead requires a multi-voiced perspective that takes into account the overlapping of imageries, story-telling, hopes and expectations from different religious and linguistic contexts: not only Christianity in its global heterogeneity (Catholic, Orthodox, Syriac Coptic), but also Jewish, Islamic (in its geographic, linguistic, and cultural variety), Mongolian and Chinese contexts⁵⁰, among others.

To conclude, the "Retelling Prester John" group will explore some chains of narratives that have arisen around the figure of Prester John focusing on the objects of the mythmaking and storytelling process, its physical settings and the practices involving the objects, but also the religious and political contexts change at the time of the great voyages in faraway lands.

I wish to thank all the scholars who took part in this project, contributing with their articles to the Theme Section "Retelling Prester John: Objects, Routes, and Emotions", and the 'native' members of the project, i.e., Alberto Camplani, Fabio L. Grassi, Alessandro Saggiaro, Agostino Soldati, Davide Torri, without whose support the project on Prester John could not be realized. A special thank to Eduard Iricinschi for his contribution to the discussion about "Prester John history-telling" and his generous revision of the text.

⁵⁰ On this point, see L.N. Gumilev, *Searches for an Imaginary Kingdom. The Legend of the Kingdom of Prester John*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1987; D. Morgan, *Prester John and the Mongols*, C.F. Beckingham - B. Hamilton (eds.), *Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes*, cit., pp. 159-170; D. Antonucci, *Tra mito e realtà: la Tartaria negli scritti dei secoli XVII-XVIII*, in «Sulla Via del Catai» 14 (2016) [Issue: *AD TARTAROS. I mongoli tra Oriente ed Occidente*], pp. 107-117; P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West, 1221-1410*, 2nd ed., Routledge, London - New York 2018; C. Taylor, *The Production of Knowledge and Preservation of Self-identity*, cit.; M. Paolillo, *Un enigma medievale al tempo di Marco Polo. L'incontro in Cina tra il missionario Giovanni da Montecorvino e un discendente del Prete Gianni*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2023.