

# The Prester John Memorial, Port Elizabeth



Next to the Port Elizabeth City Hall you will find a statue depicting a couple of intriguing characters. Its origin is steeped in deep crusader, eastern and African mythology and it depicts a man called Prester John in conversation with an unnamed Portuguese explorer.

It is believed to be the only monument in the world to celebrate the existence of the ever-elusive Prester John, said to be a descendant of the Three Magi.

Prester John, depending on whose history you are studying at the time, was also a crusader-era Christian king in Ethiopia – or possibly a high-born Mongol from the time of Genghis Khan. The belief was that he presided over – a realm full of riches and strange creatures™, and that he was also the ageless curator of the Holy Grail.

European countries, especially the seafaring, adventurous ones, were ever-set on questing in Africa from the 15th Century onwards. At first, Timbuktu was the fashionable – but fatal – quest centre for colonials.

Another popular quest was to find Prester John and his world. He symbolised the 'universal

Christian', who transcended culture and geography.

On October 10, 1486, King John II of Portugal commissioned the navigator Bartolomeu Dias to sail around the southernmost tip of Africa and see if he could find Prester John ~somewhere in the Indies™. Thus the connection between Prester and Portugal.

Dias departed the next year and, after many stops along the west coast, sailed through a vicious storm off the Cape, so vicious that he called it 'Cabo Tormentosa' ~the Cape of Storms. His king later had it renamed the Cape of Good Hope, because it promised a passage to India. Along the way, Dias left many messages of goodwill for Prester John but, as far as history records, received no reply ~nor a forwarding address.