

JOAQUIM BAETA

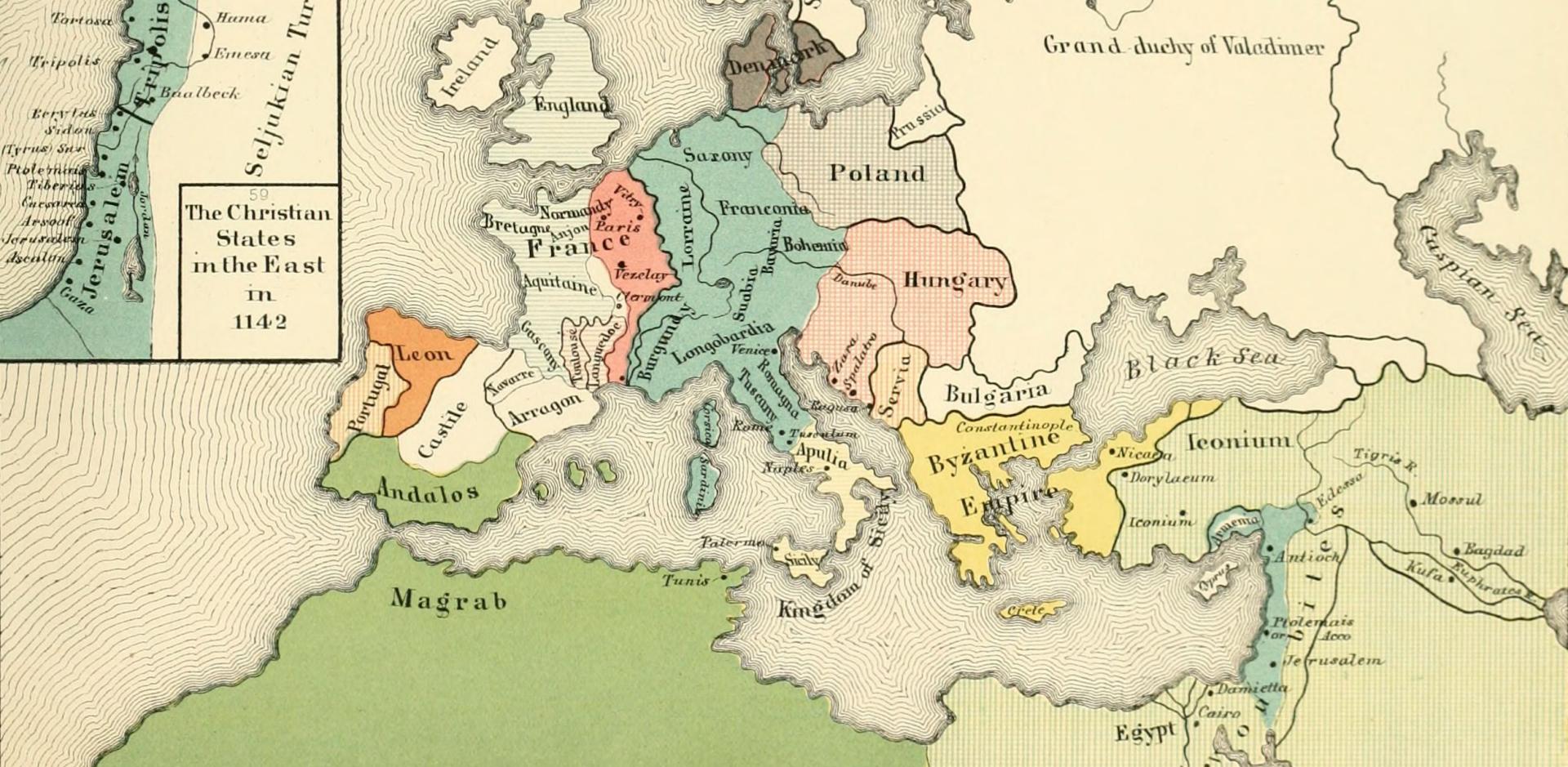
False hope and empty promises from a priest-king in the East

How environment and
communication shape belief

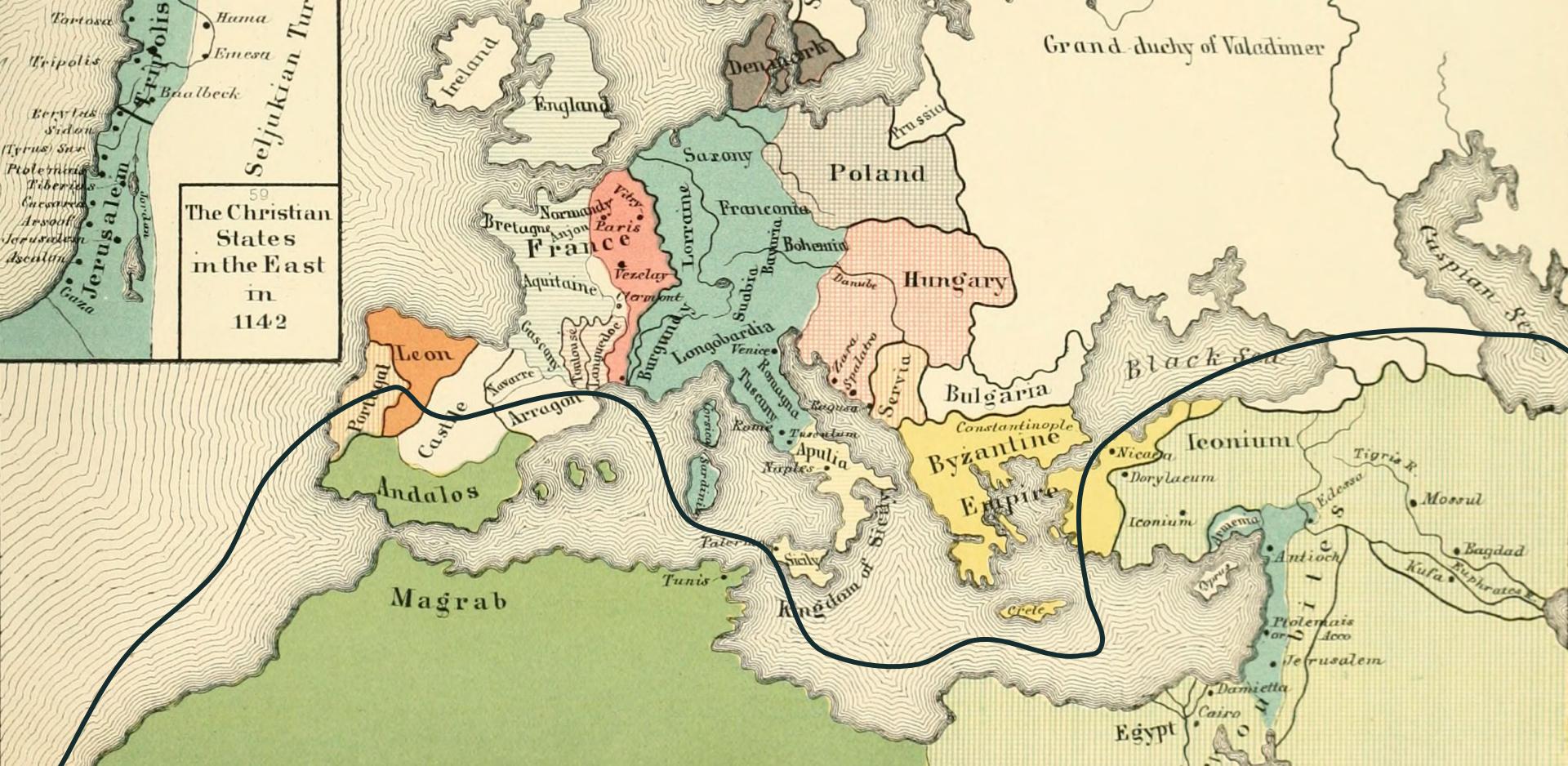
- ❖ Born in Madeira (Portugal), lived in South Africa, England, Germany, now Indonesia.
- ❖ Writer; documentarian (Scenoptica project); language editor (making scientists sound smart since 2009); web developer; content development consultant at BPP UGM (UASC; journal development).
- ❖ Interests: history and migration of language (philology); inter-relatedness of belief structures; media vs. culture; documenting the minuscule; open source (Linux!); libre content and free culture.
- ❖ Saya belum bisa bicara Bahasa Indonesia.



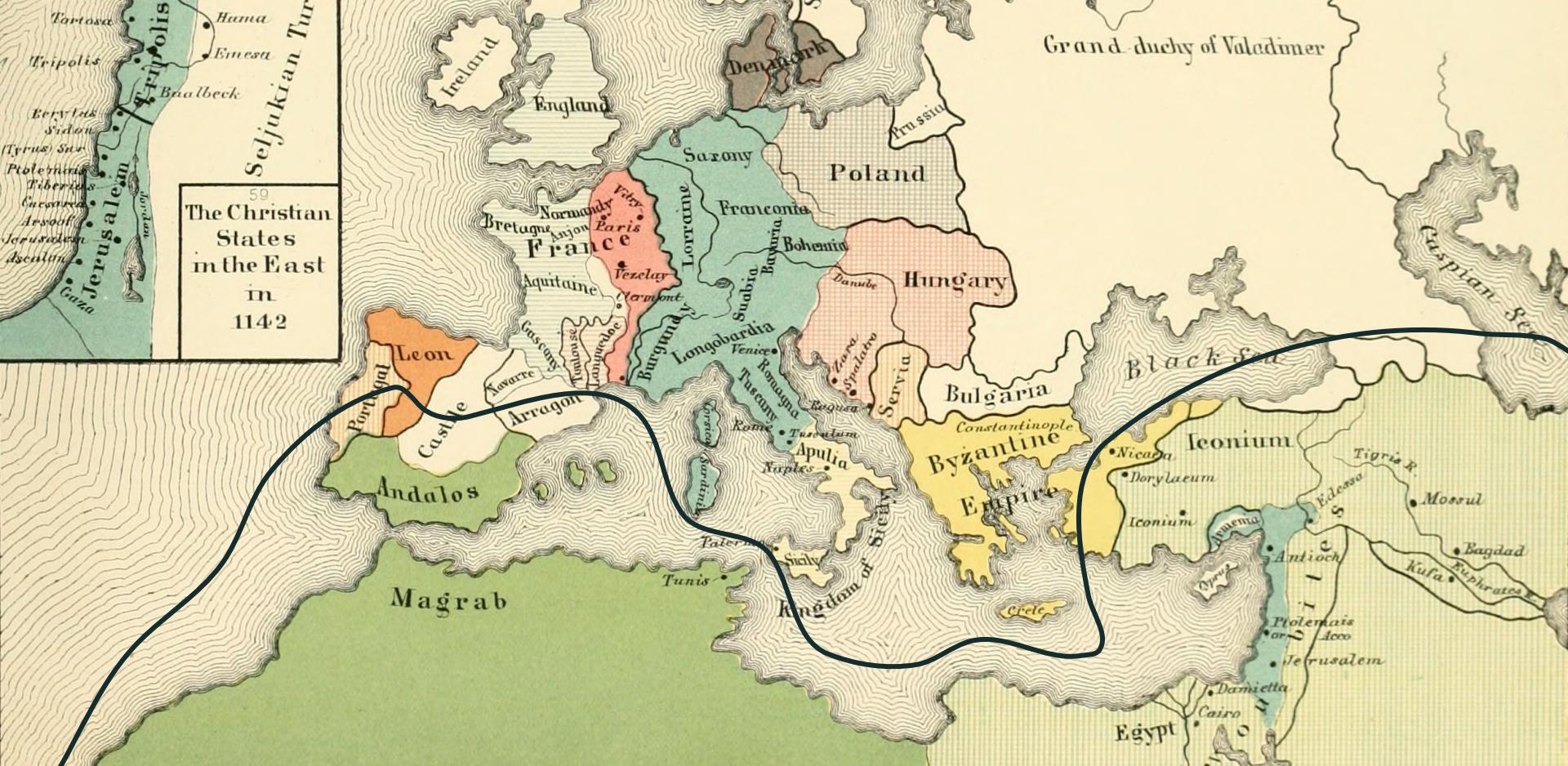
1142 CE



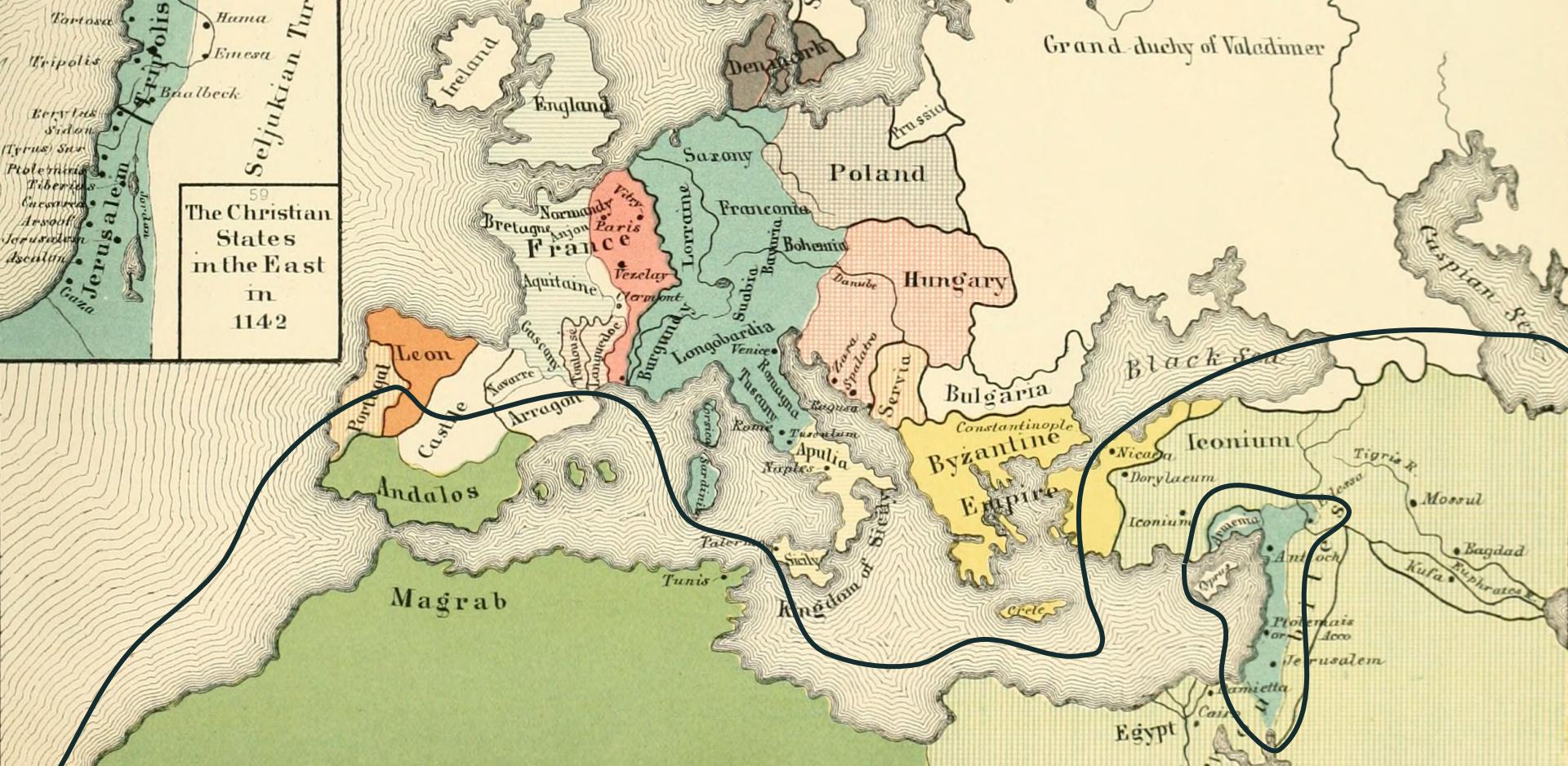
The known world is split in two.¹



In northern Africa, southern Spain, and southern Portugal, the Muslim Almoravids rule.



East and south of Byzantium, the Seljuk Turks and Fatamids push ever westward.



The Holy Land, secured in the First Crusade, is surrounded and vulnerable.

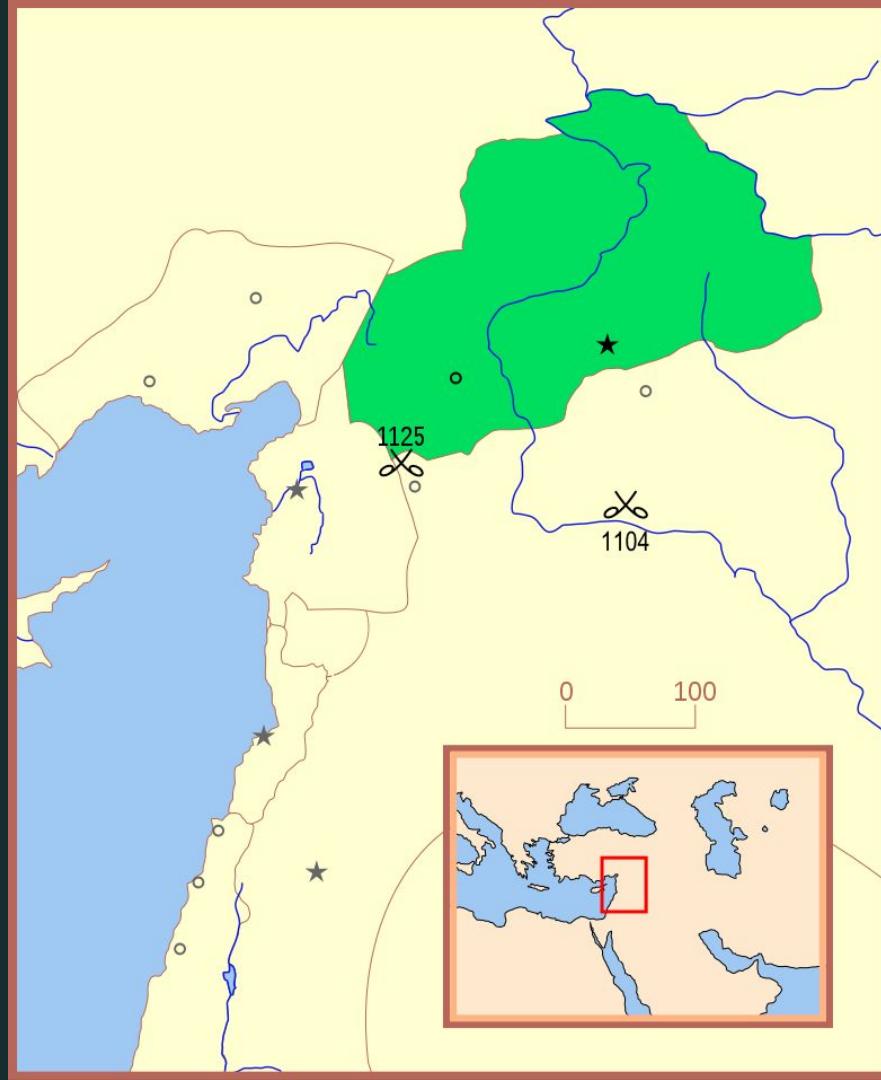


The worlds of Christianity and Islam are embroiled in a never-ending, existential war.

1144 CE

The county of Edessa falls

- ❖ The Christian county of Edessa (shown in green) is taken by the Muslim Zengi, aided by Kurds and Turkmen.²
- ❖ Thousands dead.³
- ❖ Native Christians are spared, but the Franks are executed.



Two messages are sent to the world

- ❖ Hope for Muslims.⁴
 - Muslims shift from a predominantly defensive stance to an offensive one.
 - Iranian Turks and Anatolian Turks are united; Muslims can now freely travel from Mosul to Aleppo.
 - Expulsion of the Christian invaders.
 - Can Jerusalem be retaken?

Two messages are sent to the world

- ❖ Shock and despair for Christians, Armenians, and the Franks.
 - An unexpected defeat.
 - Will happen to the remaining Crusader states?
 - This event was the catalyst for the Second Crusade.
 - Yet another sign of the impending apocalypse.⁵

Enter a figure
from the East

He was a priest.

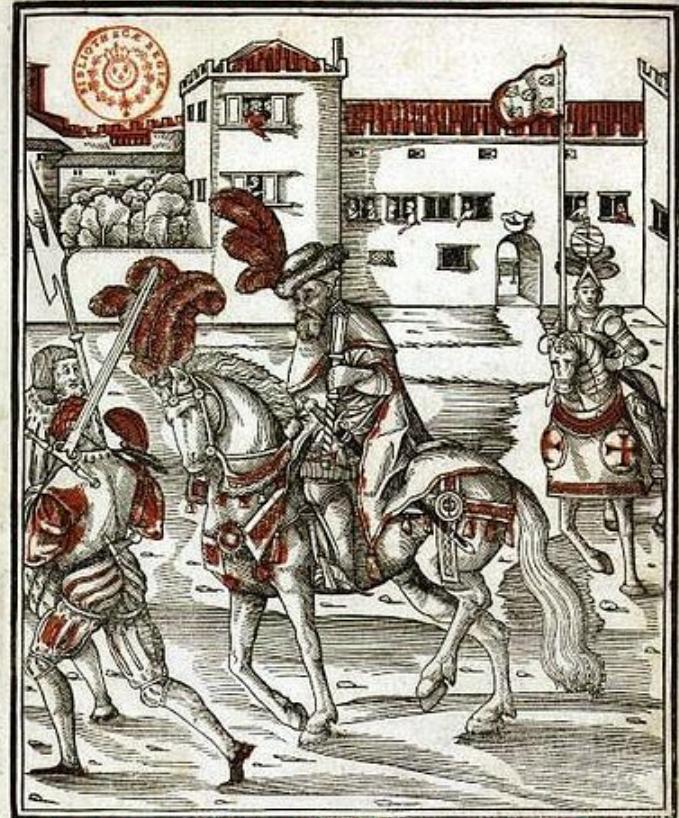


He was a king.



He was a crusader.

Ho Preste Joam das indias.



Verdadera informaçam das terras do Preste

Joam segundo vio e escreueo ho padre Francisco Aluare capellâ del Rey nosso senhor. Agora nouamente impresso por mandado do dito senhor em casa de Luis Rodriguez liureiro de sua alteza.

libri isti ex pugnari non indiget. // Fr. daus de la Pa

He was Prester John.



Fig 98.—Prester-John, Chief of a Christian Tribe in Tartary.

First official mention of Prester John

- ❖ German chronicler Otto von Freising reported a meeting with Hugh, the Bishop of Jabala (Syria) in December 1145.⁶



Otto von Freising

First official mention of Prester John

- ❖ From Otto von Freising's account, we know his name:
 - "Prester John -so he is usually called."
- ❖ That he was a king, a Christian priest, and from east of the Islamic world:
 - "a king and priest living in the Far East [...] who is a Christian."
- ❖ That he was a (potential) crusader:
 - "John moved his army to aid the church of Jerusalem."



Otto von Freising



A signal of hope for the Second Crusade in a priest-king and his Christian kingdom to the east.

A hope that never arrived.

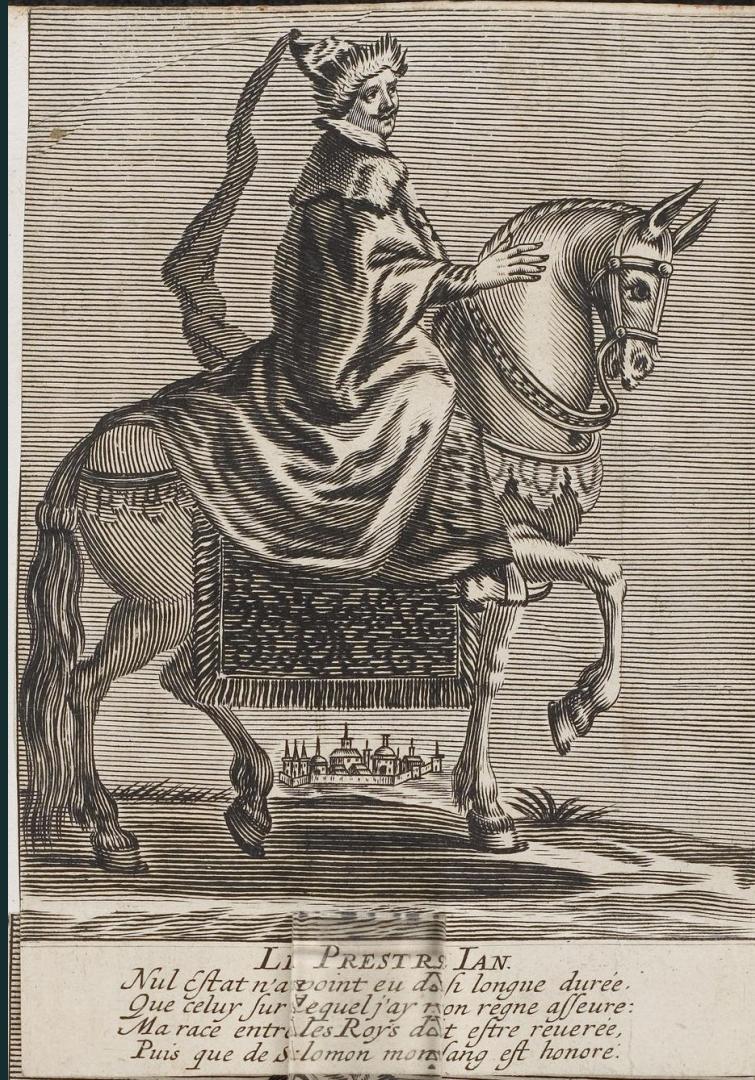
- ❖ Prester John was unable to join western Christians during the Second Crusade.
 - “he came to the Tigris and was unable to take his army across it by any means” (Otto von Freising)



Battle of Edessa, 1146.

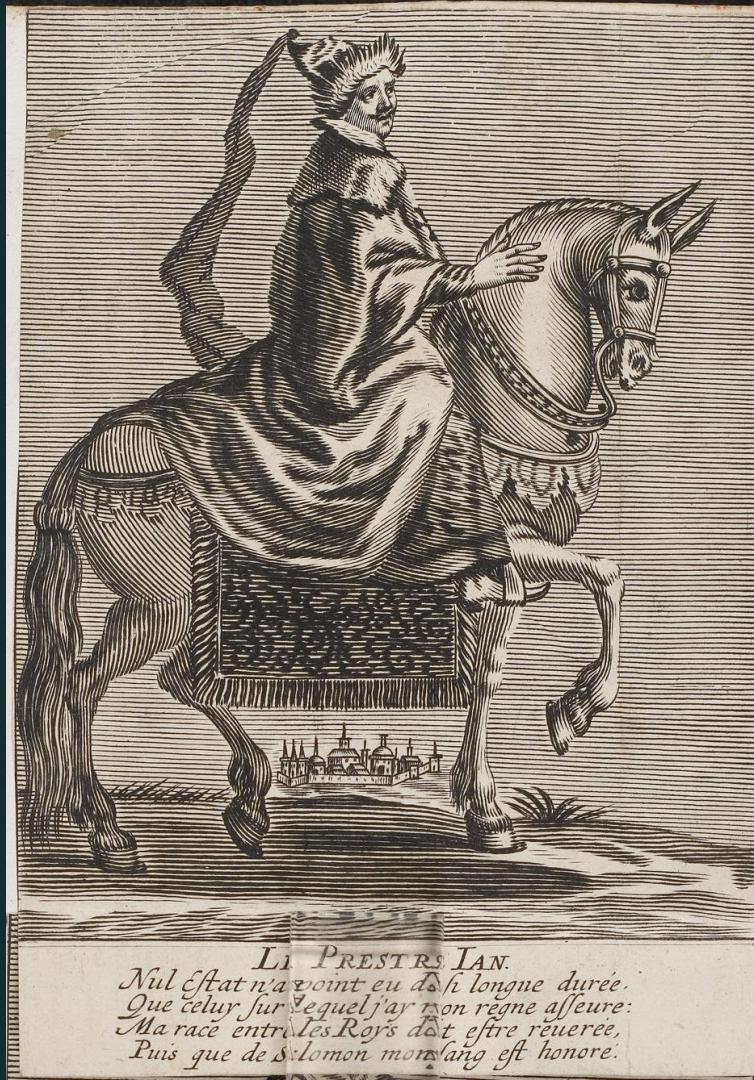
Subsequent actions

- ❖ In 1154, Prester John defeated a Muslim army in the East.
- ❖ In 1165, Prester John wrote to the Pope and the Byzantines^{7,8}:
 - “I, Prester John, who reign supreme, surpass in virtue, riches and power all creatures under heaven.”
 - “I am a zealous Christian.”
 - “We have determined to visit the sepulchre of our Lord with a very large army.”



Subsequent actions

- ❖ In 1219, a so-called Eastern Christian army marched westward.
 - This was the army of Prester John or his son, King David.⁹



Li PRESTRS JAN.
Nul ſtat n'a point eu d'ſi longue duree.
Que celuy ſur lequel j'ay mon regne aſſeuree.
Ma race entre les Roys de t eſtre reueree,
Puis que de Salomon mon lang eft honore.

And yet...

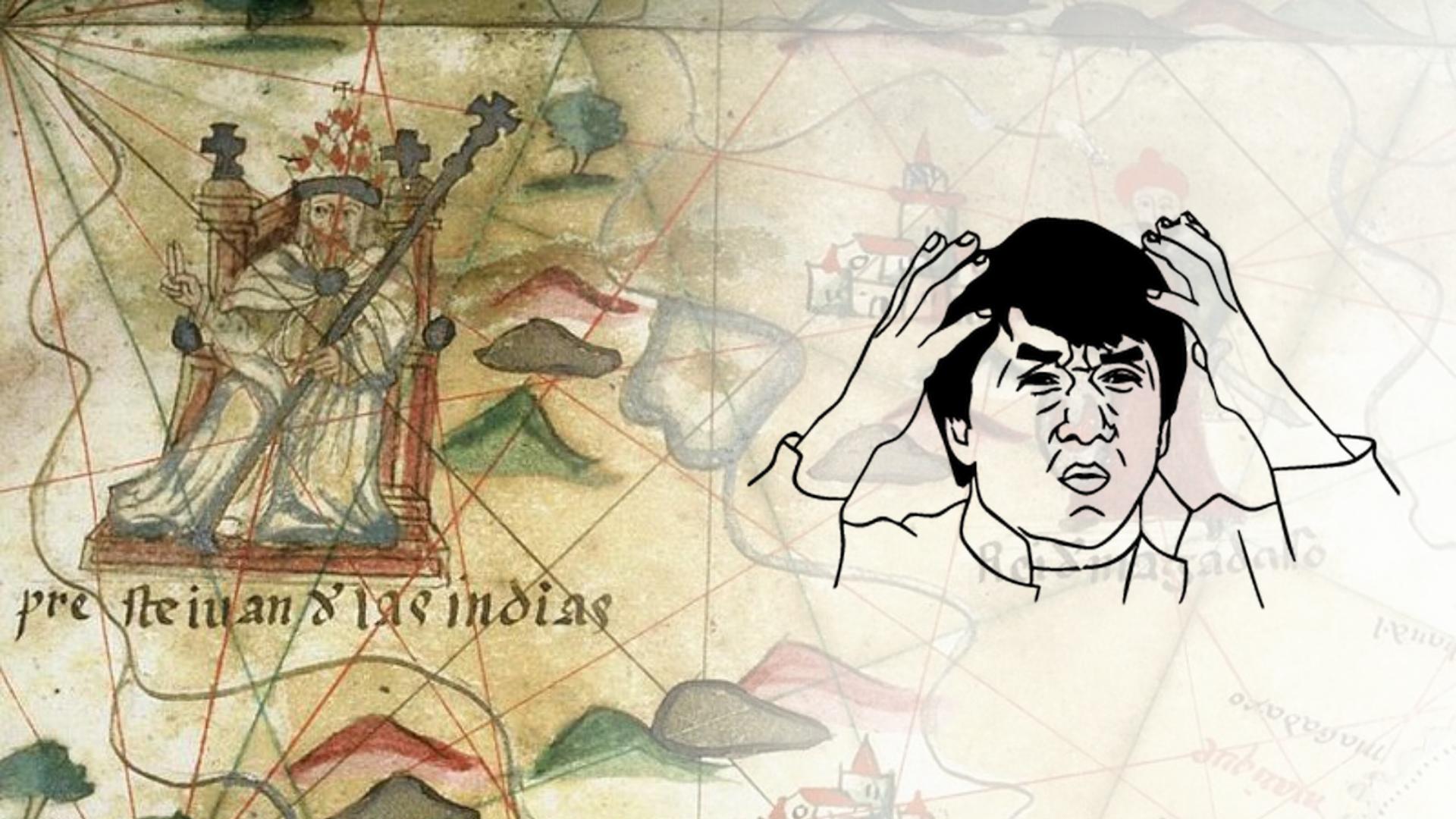
- ❖ In all subsequent campaigns, the great army of Prester John failed to show.
- ❖ King David turned out not to be the son of Prester John, but Genghis Khan.



Siege of Acre, 1189.

Where was Prester John?

Why did he not come to the aid
of the Crusader states?



preste juan d las indias

The search for Prester John

- ❖ The search for Prester John continued for centuries.
- ❖ Letters were received from the alleged children of Prester John.¹⁰
 - Including from the Mongol descendants of Genghis Khan.
- ❖ Paintings were commissioned of the presumed image of Prester John.
- ❖ Prester John's kingdom was mapped by cartographers.¹¹

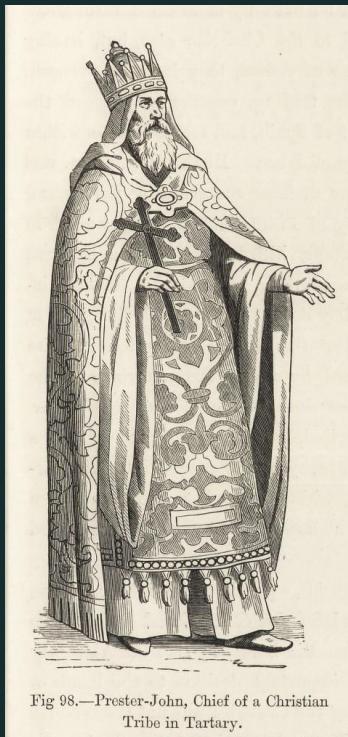
If not to the east, to the south?

- ❖ Later chroniclers traced Prester John not to the east, but to the south — Ethiopia.¹²



The dominion of Prester John in northeast Africa (yellow), ca. 1564.

A change in skin colour 700 years later



Because Prester John
did not exist.

Why did the people of the
Middle Ages believe in the
existence of Prester John?

Environment shapes belief

- ❖ Little was known of the mysterious lands east of Persia.
- ❖ Medieval existence was defined by religiosity and an existential war.
- ❖ The presence of Prester John had strategic and political ramifications.
 - An eastern ally provided Christians with an opportunity to flank the Muslims.
 - An eastern enemy threatened otherwise safe Muslim cities, such as Baghdad.
- ❖ Thus, the presumption of a Prester John offers psychological and tactical safety.

Communication shapes belief

- ❖ Communication in the medieval world:
 - Word of mouth (personal communication).
 - Letter writing.
- ❖ Representations of people and events:
 - Paintings, drawings, and sculptures.
 - Plays and verbal storytelling.
 - Written accounts, history written many years or centuries after the fact.

Communication shapes belief

- ❖ Word of mouth:
 - Otto von Freising spoke to the Bishop of Jabala, who spoke to someone else, who spoke to someone else... who described an eastern Nestorian Christian kingdom.
 - Prester John allegedly wrote letters.
- ❖ Representations of Prester John:
 - There are paintings and drawings of Prester John.
 - There are maps of his kingdom.
- ❖ If people have spoken of him, if he has written letters, if there are paintings of him, then Prester John must logically be real.

Prester John must logically be real... and yet he isn't

- ❖ The letters from Prester John were forgeries, mistranslations, or misattributed.
 - “I, Prester John, who reign supreme...” letter is a forgery.
 - Some letters from the Mongol Khans were attributed to Prester John.
- ❖ Etymological relationships between the name “Prester John” and names in foreign languages.
 - Prester John, Corchan, Paraste Gihan, Genghis Khan.
- ❖ Biblical roots.
 - John the Presbyter sounds familiar.¹³

2018 CE



Most of the planet is connected in some form.



Religion is no longer the great dividing line between humanity.



Large-scale warfare has abandoned the pretense of religion in favour of nationalism.¹⁴

Almost a millennium later,
what can we learn from the
story of Prester John?

Environment shapes belief

- ❖ Culture is global and cultural appropriation is common.
- ❖ Modern existence is fragmented.
 - Fewer and fewer people have the same jobs as their parents.
- ❖ Modern life is not defined by piety.
- ❖ Existential threats, even those that pose spiritual risk (Islamic State, Boko Haram, American invasion of Iraq/Afghanistan, genocide of the Rohingya), are localised and are motivated more by territorial and resource control.
- ❖ Political division spurs religious fervour, which in turn is exploited to foster further division.
- ❖ Climate change looms.

Communication shapes belief

- ❖ Communication in the modern world:
 - Word of mouth (personal communication).
 - Telephone, mobile phones, walkie-talkies, CB radio.
 - Email supplants letter writing.
 - Instant messaging (Signal, WhatsApp)
 - Social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat).
 - Live TV and call-in radio.
 - Streaming with instant audience reactions (Twitch, YouTube Live).

Communication shapes belief

- ❖ Representations of people and events:
 - Same as the medieval period: paintings, drawings, sculptures, plays, and verbal storytelling.
 - Photography — instant in the time it takes to both produce and disseminate.
 - Film, archival footage, and documentaries — more real than paintings.
 - Radio and podcasts.
 - Written accounts in the form of journalism.

Could belief in Prester John subsist in the information age?

- ❖ This is an easy question because the simple answer is *no*.
- ❖ The burden of proof now is much higher than even 50 years ago.
 - Word of mouth and paintings are not enough.
 - Modern humans are more sceptical.
 - Conspiracy theories.
 - Political division drives scepticism.
- ❖ Fame is far more public now; a nonexistent monarch would simply be ignored.

Could belief in Prester John subsist in the information age?

- ❖ In order to be verifiable, Prester John would need:
 - A social media account, with tons of shares/likes.



Could belief in Prester John subsist in the information age?

- ❖ In order to be verifiable, Prester John would need:
 - A social media account, with tons of shares/likes.
 - To be photographed in public by random people.



Photo by UK in Japan- FCO; <https://flic.kr/p/r8sHd6>; CC BY 2.0

Could belief in Prester John subsist in the information age?

- ❖ In order to be verifiable, Prester John would need:
 - A social media account, with tons of shares/likes.
 - To be photographed in public by random people.
 - To be in the news.

Did Prince Charles and Prince William Snub Trump During His U.K. Trip?

The Queen greeting the president alone was highly unusual.

→ by EMMA STEFANSKY

JULY 15, 2018 2:01 PM



Could belief in Prester John subsist in the information age?

- ❖ In order to be verifiable, Prester John would need:
 - A social media account, with tons of shares/likes.
 - To be photographed in public by random people.
 - To be in the news.
 - To be seen in interviews and highly televised events.



Photo by Jennifer Su; <https://flic.kr/p/bYoN2f>; CC BY 2.0

Does knowledge of this truth shield us from other lies? No!

- ❖ Just because we know the truth about Prester John, it doesn't mean we are smarter than the people of the Middle Ages.
- ❖ “Fake news” is a real problem.¹⁵
- ❖ We fall prey to propaganda every single day.¹⁶
- ❖ Humans tend to reject information that contradicts their worldview.¹⁷

The lesson in the digital age: vigilance

- ❖ Unlike medieval times, where long-distance communication took months, long-distance communication today is instant.
- ❖ This precipitates a high speed in the cadence (the rhythm) of life.
 - Snapchat, live tweeting, and Instagram stories.
 - I must reply to my friend on WhatsApp immediately.
 - I take a photo and must share it on Instagram *now*.
 - If you don't pay attention 100% of the time, you get lost in the 24-hour news cycle.

The lesson in the digital age: vigilance

- ❖ Recent elections have been decided not by policy, but rather:
 - Perception (what we think not what we know),
 - Religion (or the fear of being seen as less pious),
 - Demagoguery (e.g. Donald Trump),
 - Ignorance (we automatically believe rumours that sound plausible), and
 - Manipulation (e.g. Cambridge Analytica; fake news).
- ❖ The challenge for modern humans to rise above our preconceptions, bias, and ignorance.

Addendum: Can religion keep up with the speed of the information age?

Humanity is in a state of transition

- ❖ AI and IOT are becoming more common.
- ❖ Global society is growing steadily more liberalised, in spite of conservatives and Nazis.
- ❖ Terrorism is prevalent, but we have not had a global “hot” war since 1945.
 - In other words, we are in a time of relative peace.
- ❖ As a species, we have never been closer — and overpopulation and climate change threatens to push us even closer, for better and worse.

Religion is also in a state of transition

- ❖ The Catholic Church debates internally in response to the liberalisation of society.^{18,19,20,21}
 - Many Catholics are now in favour of gay marriage.
 - Many *other* Catholics are against gay marriage.
- ❖ The positions of the Church's varied members are defined by the society each priest serves.
 - The debate is waged because Catholicism is not concentrated to Europe — it is global. (*Communication shapes belief.*)

Belief is malleable

- ❖ Like an ecosystem, a society is simply a population of individuals continually adapting to their environment.
 - To new technology,
 - To new scientific findings,
 - To the development of new political and economic ideas,
 - To changes in resources and the climate, and
 - To the influx of new individuals.

Belief is malleable

- ❖ As a society adapts, so do its beliefs and values.
- ❖ Religion, as a system of values and moral guidelines, is the codification of a society's beliefs.
- ❖ The way in which a religion is practised will consequently conform to the changing beliefs and values.
- ❖ Fear of change is natural, but futile.

In conclusion...

- ❖ We now know the truth of Prester John, but it doesn't stop us from believing other fanciful stories.
- ❖ We must fight our own ignorance.
 - We are not slaves to disinformation! We must challenge our ignorance.
- ❖ Life is quick. If we can't think faster, we should think smarter.
 - Question manipulative Facebook posts.
 - Question the motivation of an individual who argues in bad faith.
 - Remember that a gentle lie is easier to believe than a hard truth.

(And to fellow web developers, app developers, software engineers, programmers)

- ❖ Try not to be the book publishers and messengers who facilitated the myth of Prester John.
- ❖ Realise that, in 2018, you have a duty to protect your users.
 - To protect their privacy. (If they are from Europe, this is a legal obligation.)
 - To protect them from harassment.
 - To protect them from disinformation.
 - To protect their freedom.



Fin.

References

1. Nirenberg D. *Neighboring faiths*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2014.
2. Barber M. *The crusader states*. New Haven: Yale University Press; 2012.
3. Carnotensis F. *Historia hierosolymitana*. Hagenmeyer H, editor. Heidelberg; 1913.
4. Hillenbrand C. *The Crusades: Islamic perspectives*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; 1999.
5. MacEvitt C. *The Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa: apocalypse, the first Crusade and the Armenian diaspora*. Dumbarton Oaks Papers. 2007;61:157–81.
6. Brundage J. *The Crusades: a documentary history*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press; 1962.
7. Nowel CE. The historical Prester John. *Speculum*. 1953;28:435–445.
8. Silverberg R. *The realm of Prester John*. New York: Doubleday;1972.
9. Denton AB. The quest for Prester John. *Vexillum* 2012;2:203–219.
10. Aigle D. The letters of Eljigidei, Hülegü, and Abaqa: Mongol overtures or Christian ventriloquism? *Inner Asia*. 2005;7(2):143-162.
11. Campbell MB. *Asia, Africa, Abyssinia: writing the land of Prester John*. In: Kuehn J, Smethurst P, editors. *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire*. New York: Routledge;2008.

References (cont'd)

12. Kurt A. The search for Prester John, a projected crusade and the eroding prestige of Ethiopian kings, c.1200–c.1540. *Journal of Medieval History*. 2013;39(3):297–320.
13. Torrey CC. The aramaic origin of the Gospel of John. *Harvard Theological Review*. 1923;16(4):305–344.
14. Wimmer A, Min B. From empire to nation-state: explaining wars in the modern world, 1816–2001. *American Sociological Review*. 2006;71(6):867–897.
15. Allcott H, Gentzkow M. Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. 2017;31(2):211-236.
16. Herman ES, Chomsky N. *Manufacturing consent*. New York: Pantheon;1988.
17. Nyhan B, Reifler J. When corrections fail: the persistence of political misperceptions. *Political Behavior*. 2010;32(2):303–330.
18. Hale CJ. Is the Catholic Church ‘Evolving’ on Gay Marriage? *Time*. 2014 Sept 8. [accessed 2018 Nov 4]. <http://time.com/3303851/is-the-catholic-church-evolving-on-gay-marriage>.
19. Gottlieb J. L.A. Archdiocese is steps ahead of Catholic debate over homosexuality. *Los Angeles Times*. 2014 Nov 9. [accessed 2018 Nov 4]. <http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-catholic-20141110-story.html>.

References (cont'd)

20. De Carteret D. Australia gay marriage debate highlights church divisions. Yahoo! News. 2017 Sept 11. [accessed 2018 Nov 4]. <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/australia-gay-marriage-debate-highlights-church-divisions-044259234.html>.
21. van Klinken AS. Gay rights, the devil and the end times: public religion and the enchantment of the homosexuality debate in Zambia. Religion. 2013;43(4):519-540.

List of paintings and drawings

- ❖ Domenico Zampieri. A Virgin with a Unicorn. c. 1602.
- ❖ Jean-Joseph Dassy. Croisades, origines et consequences. 1850.
- ❖ Hartmann Schedel. Prester John. 1493.
- ❖ Anonymous. Image of Prester John, enthroned, in a map of East Africa in Queen Mary's Atlas. 1558.
- ❖ Francisco Alvares. Una representacion de Prèste Joan. 1540.
- ❖ Cesare Vecellis. Prester-John, Chief of a Christian Tribe in Tartary. 1560.
- ❖ Anonymous. Otto of Freising, as depicted on a medieval stained glass window in the Cistercian Abbey of Heiligenkreuz, Austria. c. 1133.
- ❖ Sayf al-vâhidî et al. Mongols besieging Baghdad in 1258. c. 1430.
- ❖ Richard de Montbaston. Bataille d'Édesse. 1337.
- ❖ Anonymous. Le Prestrs Ian. c. 1600.
- ❖ Anonymous. Siege of Acre. c. 1280.
- ❖ Anonymous. Prester John of the Indies. c. 1550.
- ❖ Pierre-Antoine Demachy. Prester John; Emperor of the Abyssinian. 1800.

List of maps

- ❖ Robert H. Labberton. Europe during the 12th century. 1873.
- ❖ Anonymous. The County of Edessa in 1135. 2007.
- ❖ Abraham Ortelius. Map of Africa. 1573.
- ❖ Transparent 6lue. A map showing the flags of the world, in equirectangular projection. 2009.

List of other photos

- ❖ skeeze. International Space Station view. <https://pixabay.com/photo-1176518>. CC0 1.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>).
- ❖ Italian Airforce. Aerial bombing of Barcelona, 17 March 1938, by the Italian air force. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Barcelona_bombing_\(1938\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Barcelona_bombing_(1938).jpg). Public domain.