

= Prester John =

Prester John (Latin : Presbyter Johannes) is a legendary Christian patriarch and king popular in European chronicles and tradition from the 12th through the 17th century . He was said to rule over a Nestorian (Church of the East) Christian nation lost amid the Muslims and pagans of the Orient . The accounts are varied collections of medieval popular fantasy , depicting Prester John as a descendant of the Three Magi , ruling a kingdom full of riches , marvels , and strange creatures .

At first , Prester John was imagined to reside in India ; tales of the Nestorian Christians ' evangelistic success there and of Thomas the Apostle 's subcontinental travels probably provided the first seeds of the legend . After the coming of the Mongols to the Western world , accounts placed the king in Central Asia , and eventually Portuguese explorers convinced themselves that they had found him in Ethiopia .

= = Origin of the legend = =

Though its immediate genesis is unclear , the legend of Prester John drew strongly from earlier accounts of the Orient and of Westerners ' travels there . Particularly influential were the stories of Saint Thomas the Apostle 's proselytizing in India , as recorded in the 3rd @-@ century work known as the Acts of Thomas , and reports of the Church of the East in Greater Persia . The Church of the East , also called the Nestorian church , had gained a wide following in the Eastern nations and engaged the Western imagination as an assemblage both exotic and familiarly Christian . Particularly inspiring were the Nestorians ' missionary successes among the Mongols and Turks of Central Asia ; René Grousset (1970) suggested that one of the seeds of the story may have come from the Keraites , which had thousands of its members converted to Nestorian Christianity shortly after the year 1000 . By the 12th century , the Keraite rulers were still following a custom of bearing Christian names , which may have fueled the legend .

Additionally , a kernel of the tradition may have been drawn from the shadowy early Christian figure John the Presbyter of Syria , whose existence is first inferred by the ecclesiastical historian and bishop Eusebius of Caesarea based on his reading of earlier church fathers . This man , said in one document to be the author of two of the Epistles of John , was supposed to have been the teacher of the martyr bishop Papias , who had in turn taught Eusebius ' own teacher Irenaeus . However , little links this figure , supposedly active in the late 1st century , to the Prester John legend beyond the name .

The later accounts of Prester John borrowed heavily from literary texts concerning the East , including the great body of ancient and medieval geographical and travel literature . Details were often lifted from literary and pseudohistorical accounts , such as the tale of Sinbad the Sailor . The Alexander romance , a fabulous account of Alexander the Great 's conquests , was especially influential in this regard .

Scholars have debated over the origins of Prester John 's name , speculating that Prester could be a corruption of either the word " Presbyter " or " priest " . Sir John Mandeville , a medieval writer who was famous in his lifetime for his travel accounts , wrote of an emperor named John who decides to become a priest after an audience with a Christian knight , in which the " emperor seyde , that he wolde no longer ben clept kyng ne emperor , but preest " . This reference suggests that the latter reading of Prester as " preest " as the correct interpretation of Prester John 's name .

The legend is first recorded in the early 12th century with reports of visits of an " Archbishop of India " to Constantinople , and of a " Patriarch of India " to Rome at the time of Pope Callixtus II (1119 ? 1124) . These visits cannot be confirmed , evidence of both being secondhand reports . What is certain is that German chronicler Otto of Freising reported in his Chronicon of 1145 that the previous year he had met a certain Hugh , bishop of Jabala in Syria , at the court of Pope Eugene III in Viterbo . Hugh was an emissary of Prince Raymond of Antioch seeking Western aid against the Saracens after the Siege of Edessa , and his counsel incited Eugene to call for the Second Crusade . He told Otto , in the presence of the pope , that Prester John , a Nestorian Christian who served in the dual position of priest and king , had regained the city of Ecbatana from the brother monarchs of

Medes and Persia , the Samiardi , in a great battle " not many years ago " . Afterwards Prester John allegedly set out for Jerusalem to rescue the Holy Land , but the swollen waters of the Tigris compelled him to return to his own country . His fabulous wealth was demonstrated by his emerald scepter ; his holiness by his descent from the Three Magi .

Silverberg connects this account with historical events of 1141 , when the Kara @-@ Khitan Khanate under Yelü Dashi defeated the Seljuk Turks near Samarkand . While the Kara @-@ Khitan at the time were Buddhists and not Christian , several vassals of the Kara @-@ Khitan practiced Nestorian Christianity , which may have contributed to the legend as well as the possibility that the Europeans , who were unfamiliar with the concept of Buddhism , assumed that if the leader was not Muslim , he must be Christian . The report of the defeat would have inspired a notion of " deliverance from the East " , and it is possible Otto recorded Hugh 's report to prevent complacency in the Crusade 's European backers ; according to his account , no help could be expected from a powerful Eastern king .

= = Letter of Prester John = =

No more of the tale is recorded until about 1165 when copies of what was certainly a forged Letter of Prester John started spreading throughout Europe . An epistolary wonder tale with parallels suggesting its author knew the Romance of Alexander and the above @-@ mentioned Acts of Thomas , the Letter was supposedly written to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenus (1143 ? 1180) by Prester John , descendant of one of the Three Magi and King of India . The many marvels of richness and magic it contained captured the imagination of Europeans , and it was translated into numerous languages , including Hebrew . It circulated in ever more embellished form for centuries in manuscripts , a hundred examples of which still exist . The invention of printing perpetuated the letter 's popularity in printed form ; it was still current in popular culture during the period of European exploration . Part of the letter 's essence was that a lost kingdom of Nestorian Christians still existed in the vastnesses of Central Asia .

The credence given to the reports was such that Pope Alexander III sent a letter to Prester John via his physician Philip on September 27 , 1177 . Nothing more is recorded of Philip , but it is most probable that he did not return with word from Prester John . The Letter continued to circulate , accruing more embellishments with each copy . In modern times , textual analysis of the letter 's variant Hebrew versions has suggested an origin among the Jews of northern Italy or Languedoc : several Italian words remained in the Hebrew texts . At any rate , the Letter 's author was most likely a Westerner , though his or her purpose remains unclear .

= = Mongol Empire = =

In 1221 , Jacques de Vitry , Bishop of Acre , returned from the disastrous Fifth Crusade with good news : King David of India , the son or grandson of Prester John , had mobilized his armies against the Saracens . He had already conquered Persia , then under the Khwarezmian Empire 's control , and was moving on towards Baghdad as well . This descendant of the great king who had defeated the Seljuks in 1141 planned to reconquer and rebuild Jerusalem . Controversial Soviet historian and ethnologist Lev Gumilev speculated that the much reduced crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem in the Levant resuscitated this legend in order to raise Christian hopes and to encourage European monarchs who by that time had lost interest in getting involved in costly crusades in a distant region that was far removed from their own states and affairs .

The bishop of Acre was correct in thinking that a great King had conquered Persia ; however " King David " , as it turned out , was Tengrist warlord Genghis Khan . His reign took the story of Prester John in a new direction . Though Genghis was at first seen as a scourge of Christianity 's enemies , he proved to be tolerant of religious faiths among those subjects that did not resist the empire , and was the first East Asian ruler to invite clerics from three major religions (Christianity , Islam , and Buddhism) to a symposium so that he might learn more about their beliefs . The Mongol ruler was also reputed to have a Nestorian Christian favorite among his many wives , whom the Europeans

imagined as influential in the disastrous Mongol sack of Baghdad .

The Mongol Empire 's rise gave Western Christians the opportunity to visit lands that they had never seen before , and they set out in large numbers along the Empire 's secure roads . Belief that a lost Nestorian kingdom existed in the east , or that the Crusader states ' salvation depended on an alliance with an Eastern monarch , was one reason for the numerous Christian ambassadors and missionaries sent to the Mongols . These include Franciscan explorers Giovanni da Pian del Carpine in 1245 and William of Rubruck in 1253 .

The link between Prester John and Genghis Khan was elaborated upon at this time , as the Prester became identified with Genghis ' foster father , Toghril , king of the Keraites , given the Jin title Ong Khan Toghril . Fairly truthful chroniclers and explorers such as Marco Polo , Crusader @-@ historian Jean de Joinville , and the Franciscan voyager Odoric of Pordenone stripped Prester John of much of his otherworldly veneer , portraying him as a more realistic earthly monarch . Odoric places John 's land to the west of Cathay en route to Europe , and mentions its capital as Casan , which may correspond to Kazan , the Tatar capital near Moscow . Joinville describes Genghis Khan in his chronicle as a " wise man " who unites all the Tartar tribes and leads them to victory against their strongest enemy , Prester John . William of Rubruck says a certain " Vut " , lord of the Keraites and brother to the Nestorian King John , was defeated by the Mongols under Genghis . Genghis made off with Vut 's daughter and married her to his son , and their union produced Möngke , the Khan at the time William wrote . According to Marco Polo 's Travels , the war between the Prester and Genghis started when Genghis , new ruler of the rebellious Tartars , asked for the hand of Prester John 's daughter in marriage . Angered that his lowly vassal would make such a request , Prester John denied him in no uncertain terms . In the war that followed , Genghis triumphed and Prester John perished .

The historical figure behind these accounts , Toghril , was in fact a Nestorian Christian monarch defeated by Genghis . He had fostered the future Khan after the death of his father Yesugei and was one of his early allies , but the two had a falling out . After Toghril rejected a proposal to wed his son and daughter to Genghis ' children , the rift between them grew until war broke out in 1203 . Genghis captured Sorghaghtani Beki , daughter of Toghril 's brother Jaqa Gambu , and married her to his son Tolui ; they had several children , including Möngke , Kublai , Hulagu , and Ariq Böke .

The major characteristic of Prester John tales from this period is the king 's portrayal not as an invincible hero , but merely one of many adversaries defeated by the Mongols . But as the Mongol Empire collapsed , Europeans began to shift away from the idea that Prester John had ever really been a Central Asian king . At any rate they had little hope of finding him there , as travel in the region became dangerous without the security the Empire had provided . In works such as The Travels of Sir John Mandeville and Historia Trium Regum by John of Hildesheim , Prester John 's domain tends to regain its fantastic aspects and finds itself located not on the steppes of Central Asia , but back in India proper , or some other exotic locale . Wolfram von Eschenbach tied the history of Prester John to the Holy Grail legend in his poem Parzival , in which the Prester is the son of the Grail maiden and the Saracen knight Feirefiz .

A theory was put forward by the Russian scholar Ph. Bruun in 1876 , who suggested that Prester John might be found among the kings of Georgia , which , at the time of Crusades , experienced military resurgence challenging the Muslim power . However , this theory , though regarded with certain indulgence by Henry Yule and some modern Georgian historians , was summarily dismissed by Friedrich Zarncke .

= = Ethiopia = =

Prester John had been considered the ruler of India since the legend 's beginnings , but " India " was a vague concept to the Europeans . Writers often spoke of the " Three Indias " , and lacking any real knowledge of the Indian Ocean , they sometimes considered Ethiopia one of the three . Westerners knew that Ethiopia was a powerful Christian nation , but contact had been sporadic since the rise of Islam . No Prester John was to be found in Asia , so European imagination moved him around the blurry frontiers of " India " until it found an appropriately powerful kingdom for him in

Ethiopia . Evidence has suggested that locating Prester John 's kingdom in Ethiopia entered the collective consciousness around 1250 .

Marco Polo had discussed Ethiopia as a magnificent Christian land and Orthodox Christians had a legend that the nation would one day rise up and invade Arabia , but they did not place Prester John there . Then in 1306 , 30 Ethiopian ambassadors from Emperor Wedem Arad came to Europe , and Prester John was mentioned as the patriarch of their church in a record of their visit . Another description of an African Prester John is in the *Mirabilia Descripta* of Dominican missionary Jordanus , around 1329 . In discussing the " Third India " , Jordanus records a number of fanciful stories about the land and its king , whom he says Europeans call Prester John .

After this point , an African location became increasingly popular . This may have resulted from increasing ties between Europe and Africa as 1428 saw the Kings of Aragon and Ethiopia actively negotiating the possibility of a strategic marriage between the two kingdoms . On 7 May 1487 , two Portuguese envoys , Pêro da Covilhã and Afonso de Paiva , were sent traveling secretly overland to gather information on a possible sea route to India , but also to inquire about Prester John . Covilhã managed to reach Ethiopia . Although well received , he was forbidden to depart . More envoys were sent in 1507 , after Socotra was taken by the Portuguese . As a result of this mission , and facing Muslim expansion , regent queen Eleni of Ethiopia sent ambassador Mateus to king Manuel I of Portugal and to the Pope , in search of a coalition . Mateus reached Portugal via Goa , having returned with a Portuguese embassy , along with priest Francisco Álvares in 1520 . Francisco Álvares ' book , which included the testimony of Covilhã , the *Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Índias* (" A True Relation of the Lands of Prester John of the Indies ") was the first direct account of Ethiopia , greatly increasing European knowledge at the time , as it was presented to the pope , published and quoted by Giovanni Battista Ramusio .

By the time the emperor Lebna Dengel and the Portuguese had established diplomatic contact with each other in 1520 , Prester John was the name by which Europeans knew the Emperor of Ethiopia . The Ethiopians , though , had never called their emperor that . When ambassadors from Emperor Zara Yaqob attended the Council of Florence in 1441 , they were confused when council prelates insisted on referring to their monarch as Prester John . They tried to explain that nowhere in Zara Yaqob 's list of regnal names did that title occur . However , their admonitions did little to stop Europeans from calling the King of Ethiopia Prester John . Some writers who used the title did understand it was not an indigenous honorific ; for instance Jordanus seems to use it simply because his readers would have been familiar with it , not because he thought it authentic .

Ethiopia has been claimed for many years as the origin of the Prester John legend , but most modern experts believe that the legend was simply adapted to fit that nation in the same fashion that it had been projected upon Ong Khan and Central Asia during the 13th century . Modern scholars find nothing about the Prester or his country in the early material that would make Ethiopia a more suitable identification than any place else , and furthermore , specialists in Ethiopian history have effectively demonstrated that the story was not widely known there until well after European contact . Czech Franciscan Remedius Prutky asked Emperor Iyasu II about this identification in 1751 , and Prutky states that the man was " astonished , and told me that the kings of Abyssinia had never been accustomed to call themselves by this name . " In a footnote to this passage , Richard Pankhurst states that this is apparently the first recorded statement by an Ethiopian monarch about this tale , and they were likely unaware of the title until Prutky 's inquiry .

17th @-@ century academics like German orientalist Hiob Ludolf demonstrated that there was no actual native connection between Prester John and the Ethiopian monarchs , and the fabled king left the maps for good .

= = Modern reception = =

The legend had affected several hundred years of European and world history , directly and indirectly , by encouraging Europe 's explorers , missionaries , scholars , and treasure hunters .

William Shakespeare 's 1600 play *Much Ado About Nothing* contains an early modern reference to the legendary king , as does Tirso de Molina 's *El Burlador de Sevilla* . In 1910 British novelist and

politician John Buchan used the legend in his sixth book , Prester John , to supplement a plot about a Zulu uprising in South Africa . This book is an archetypal example of the early 20th @-@ century adventure novel , and proved very popular in its day .

Charles Williams , a member of the 20th @-@ century literary group the Inklings , made Prester John a messianic protector of the Holy Grail in his 1930 novel War in Heaven . The Prester and his kingdom also figure prominently in Umberto Eco 's 2000 novel Baudolino , in which the titular protagonist enlists his friends to write the Letter of Prester John for his adoptive father Frederick Barbarossa , but it is stolen before they can send it out .

Perhaps because of Buchan 's work , Prester John also appeared in 20th @-@ century pulp fiction and comics . For example , Marvel Comics has featured " Prester John " in issues of Fantastic Four and Thor . He was a significant supporting character in several issues of the DC Comics fantasy series Arak : Son of Thunder . His Avatar is the ally of the Pendragon in Mage : The Hero Defined . The 1992 video game Castles II : Siege and Conquest contains a sub @-@ plot involving the search for Prester John 's kingdom . Prester John also features in Tad Williams ' epic trilogy , Memory , Sorrow and Thorn and Season 2 of Netflix 's Marco Polo includes references to Prestor John .

= = = Fiction = = =

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