

The Search for Prester John – Part 2

By Heather Daveno, 1988
Contact: thedaveno@gmail.com
AugustPhoenixHats.com

The Search in China and Mongolia

The legend of Prester John was continued by European explorers and missionaries as they traveled through China. During the 3rd Crusade, John of Joinville, the chief chronicler for Louis IX of France, wrote of two envoys who were sent to Kuyuk Khan, bearing with them a chapel and necessaries for holding Mass (it had been understood that Kuyuk was Christian). Upon their arrival, they were received by Oghul, who explained that her husband, Kuyuk, had died. As she had become Regent until the next khiraltai, she accepted the chapel as tribute, and demanded similar offering each year. Joinville wrote that in a letter by the King of the Mongols, Prester John had been killed by the Mongolians. Modern speculation is that this story is based on the murder of Togrul Khan by Chinghis Khan in 1203.

In 1251, Friar William of Rubrik was sent by King Louis to Manke Khan, to enlist his aid in the Crusade against Egypt. Louis thought that the Mongols could be persuaded to attack the Saracens from the rear, while Europe could attack from the front. It was known that the Mongols weren't Moslems. It was hoped that Prester John lived somewhere in Mongolia, and could help convert the tribe to Christianity. Hope later faded when the Golden Horde accepted Islam instead(10).

While among the Mongols, Friar William heard the story of the man Chinghis Khan had overthrown, and whom John Plano of Carpini (an earlier Franciscan traveler) had identified as Prester John. The man was a Nestorian shepherd who had lived in Black Cathay, who governed the Naimans, a Nestorian Christian tribe. His Chinese name, Ta-Yang-Khan, was translated by William into Great King John.

Marco Polo looked for Prester John while serving under Kubilai Khan in China.(11) He was certain Prester John was a Mongol king, that he did not live in India with St. Thomas Christians or in Ethiopia. His first reference was to the Tartar of Manchuria, who had no sovereign, but who laid tribute to a great prince they called Khakhan, or Great Lord. Marco presumed this to be Prester John. He goes on to say that when the Tartar multiplied, Prester John scattered them over various countries, so they would be too widespread to form any rebellions. When Chinghis Khan united the Tartars in 1200, he sent an envoy to Prester John to ask for his daughter in marriage. When Prester John refused, he was met on the battlefield by Chinghis, where Prester John died. Marco later identified this Prester John as the chief of the Keraites, Togrul Khan. He was the only Christian leader of all Eastern people, whose name translated to one that sounded like John.

Marco went on to speculate that the descendants of Prester John continued to rule their kingdom from the old Kerait capital of Karakorum, and that this kingdom had

become tributary to Kubilai Khan. The historical event from which this story comes happened in 1202, when Chinghis tried to arrange a marriage between his son Jochi, and Togrul's daughter Jaurbigi. When the offer was rejected, Chingis killed Togrul in battle, and absorbed the Kerait into his federation of Mongolian tribes.(12) After the overthrow of the Christian missions in Asia, and the closure of land routs through India by Timur in the 15th century, Indian traditions filtered into Europe through African ports on the Red Sea.

The Legends in Ethiopia and Africa

By the 14th century, Europe had stopped its search for Prester John in Asia, partially because of the fall of the Mongol Empire, partially because of the expulsion of the Catholic churches from Asia, which cut East-West communications. It was thought that Prester John had ruled both Asia and Africa; that he had been conquered by his adversaries (the Mongols) to whom he had lost his Asian holdings; that he had moved to Ethiopia and Nubia where he still had land. Attentions were therefore turned to Ethiopia, which was considered to be one of the three Indias in medieval geography.

In 1290, a commercial treaty was signed between Genoa and Egypt. In 1306, emissaries from Ethiopia arrived in Genoa to aid the Spanish in their struggle against the Moslems. It was hoped that Spain would return the favor, aiding Ethiopia in their own battle with the Moslem King Amda-Seyon, who was persecuting Ethiopian Coptic Christians in Egypt by threatening to cut off the flow of the Nile and turn Egypt into a desert.(13) These emissaries were interviewed by the Italian geographer Giovane da Carignano, who compiled a treatise on the government, customs and religion of Ethiopia. Carignani was the first writer to place Prester John in Ethiopia. The "Mirabilia Descripta" or Book of Wonders (written between 1330-40 by a French Dominican, Jordan of Severac) also referred to the Ethiopian emperor as Prester John. The author had heard this from travelers in the region.

In 1440 Franciscan friar Albert Berdini of Sarteano was appointed by Pope Eugenius IV as his papal legate to India. Albert left Venice with letters addressed to the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria, Emperor Prester John of the Ethiopians, and Emperor Thomas of the Indians; the purpose of which was to affiliate their churches with the Church of Rome.

In 1486, King Joao of Portugal made attempts to communicate with Prester John, in order to form an alliance with him. He sent two men—Alphonsus Paiva and Johannes Petreius—to find the legendary king. When they reached Aden (in southern Arabia), they found many Asiatic traditions, including the stories of Prester John in India and Ethiopia, to be confused. It was decided that Petreius would travel to India, and Paive would search in Ethiopia for their man. In India, Petreius found among the Nestorians of South India a story of Prester John, whose power had been overthrown by the Mongols. Paive found that the King of Ethiopia didn't correspond to the Prester John of historical dominion, but was rather that Prester was a title of priestly office. But by the 15th century, the fabled and popular

imagination overrode the facts and by 1486 in Portugal and Spain, the history of Ethiopia and Abyssinia was the story of Prester John, who became synonymous with the Emperor of Ethiopia.

By the early 16th century, most of Portugal had figured out that the Ethiopian king known as Prester John was unrelated to the legendary monarch of the 12th century. In 1502, Valentin Fernandez, a Portuguese scholar, published a translation of the journal of Marco Polo and other travelers.⁽¹⁴⁾ In the preface of this work, he stated that the Ethiopian king considered to be Prester John was not the Prester John of legend, who had been killed by the great khan who then took his lands. Valentin went on to state that the descendant who paid tribute to the great khan was a Nestorian Christian linked to St. Thomas; the King of Ethiopia was a Jacobite Christian, and not related to the Nestorian.

Exploration and the Spice Trade

In 1411, Queen Philippa of Portugal suggested that an armed expedition be sent to North Africa to find Prester John, as well as a new overland spice route. One of her sons, Prince Henry the Navigator, decided that the way to the Indies was not overland, but by sea. He died in 1460, before Portuguese ships had found the point of Africa. In 1461 Henry's nephew, King Alfonso, awarded the African trade rights to Fernao Gomes of Lisbon; in return he promised to discover 1000 leagues of coast per year. His son, King John sent Diego Cao on further expeditions. Cao thought he had discovered Zanzibar, on the East coast of Africa, where the kingdom of Prester John was presumed to be. Just as King John sent ambassadors with the news to Pope Innocent VIII, Cao returned to say he had been mistaken. He was replaced by Bartolomew Dias, who was more successful, and discovered the Cape of Good Hope.

Meanwhile, the Portuguese were still trying to penetrate the interior. In 1481, Afonso de Aveiro founded a trading post at Benin (modern Nigeria) where he had learned of King Ogane, who was highly revered, and who gave crosses as tokens of approval to chiefs when they came into power in that region. King Ogane received envoys while he was surrounded by silk curtains, revealing to the envoy only one of his feet. King John's geographers calculated that this king lived in Ethiopia. Since it had been reported that Prester John gave out crosses and was kept hidden by veils, it was assumed that this king must be Prester John of legend.

Portugal hoped to become independently established the spice trade by setting up trading posts in India and Ethiopia on the coast of the Red Sea—thus eliminating the Italian and Arabian middlemen. Winning the friendship of Prester John was essential to that goal. So in 1487, Diego de Covilhao and Alfonso de Paiva—courtiers of King John,—traveled to Aden. Covilhao sailed from there to India to study the Arabian and Hindi spice merchants, supply sources and shipping seasons. Three years later he went to Cairo. He was to have met up with Paiva, who had died there earlier after having returned from Ethiopia. In 1493 Covilhao entered Ethiopia, where he was received by King Eskender. The king promised to send him

home with riches, but died before he could fulfill his promise. Covilhao was refused permission to leave by the next king, and ended his days there.

Manuel ascended the throne in 1495, and put Vasco da Gama in command of an expedition to explore the coast of Africa. They reached Mozambique in 1498, where da Gama was told by local merchants that Prester John held many coastal cities. Da Gama continued up the coast, looking for a route to India. They arrived in Calcutta in May of that year, and returned with spices to Lisbon in 1499. Over the next few years, Portuguese fleets continued to sail to Lisbon, establishing Lisbon as a European spice port. To protect against warring Moslems, they built a series of forts along this new route.

In 1505 the Portuguese stormed and sacked cities along the African shore, in order to strengthen their hold on the spice route. At the same time, Affonso de Albuquerque worked to capture the port of Ormuz and Aden, in order to close the Moslem shipping ports. During his operations between 1506-09, Albuquerque tried to gain allegiance with Prester John and the Ethiopians; in order to capture Mecca, take Mohammed's coffin and use it to ransom the Holy Land.

In January 1520, Diego Lopez da Sequiera set out to gain control of the Red Sea. His party arrived in April in Massawa, where he met with the governor of Prester John's encampment, and were summoned to an audience. They met with a government official outside of Prester John's tent, who took their gifts—four bales of pepper, a sword, a dagger, four pieces of tapestry, cuirasses, a gilded helm, two cannon, for gun chambers, balls, powder and a world map into the tent. The visitors then retired to their own pavilions, where Prester John sent them gifts of 30 loaves of white bread, mead and a cow. The next day they were sent more bread and wine, and a calf encased in bread and stuffed with fruit and spices. Two days later, camp broke and moved on. The visitors were told that they could follow if they bought mules to pack their goods.

The king who was thought to be Prester John was Lebna Dengel, grandson of Queen Eleni, who had invited the envoy. Lebna, a Coptic, was normally hidden behind curtains, as royal invisibility was essential to the prestige of the Ethiopian king. But the Portuguese were most fortunate to be allowed to see King Lebna unshielded, as he sat upon his throne. He wore a gold and silver crown, held a silver cross in his hand; his mouth and beard were covered by blue taffeta. He was of moderate stature, chestnut brown, and about 23 years old. Lebna questioned them for days on religious matters, then gave his support to the building of a Portuguese fortress on the Red Sea at Massawa, so that he could open a road and join with the other Christian Princes. The Portuguese returned to Massawa in February of the following year.

Sequeira wrote to King Manuel, who in turn wrote to Pope Leo X, saying that "the most powerful bishop of the Indian and Ethiopian Christians, Prester John, Lord of the Province of Absynnia, had been found. This letter was published in Latin. At the same time in Lisbon, a book was published containing this letter, news of the mission into the interior, facts pertaining to Ethiopian life and religion, and a letter

by Queen Eleni to King Manuel in 1514. This may have been the letter Eleni wrote when she was visited by the two Joao's, in which she offered men to help fight the Moors. The letter was sent with her ambassador to Albuquerque, who had become viceroy of India. King Manuel sent the letter to the Pope, saying that Prester John's ambassador had offered all possible aid and necessities for the war against the enemies of the Catholic Church. This aid never surfaced. Albuquerque tried to take both Massawa and Aden, but died in the process. His campaign collapsed, as did Portugal's monopoly on the spice trade. Consequently, Portugal's search for Prester John ceased.

The Legend in Period Literature

Though disproved to the Portuguese, the rest of Europe still held that Prester John was real. He became the subject of chapbooks—pamphlets which were sold by street peddlers—like the dime novels of later times. These chapbooks dealt with popular themes, were illustrated with wood cuts, and were widely read.

One such author was Sir John Mandeville, who may have been the pseudonym for Jean de Bourgogne (or vice-versa, as the text was unclear). A book called "Travels", dating to about 1366, was a compendium of works of other travelers, written in the form of a travelogue by the author when he presumably traveled himself. The work was from "the Seculū Munde" by Vincent of Beauvais (who died in 1264), which itself included excerpts from the journals of John Plano of Carpini, romances about Alexander the Great, and quotes from Pliny, the Greek philosopher. To this Mandeville also added pieces from Friar Odoric of Pordenone's accounts of the countries east of the Levant (eastern Mediterranean countries).

Prester John's 12th century letter to Pope Alexander III was printed in Venice in 1478, in the Italian translation and with expanded text. The first Latin publication was printed in Germany in 1480, as part of a chapbook entitled "De Rite et Moribus Indorum" (the Rite and Customs of the Indians). With this letter was a 12th century document "De Adventu" which told of the visit of Patriarch John of the Indians to Rome, and the telling of the miracles of St. Thomas. Both these stories were printed in chapbook form in 1490 in the Dutch city of Deventer. A chapbook published in Cologne the same year included an account of the travels of Joannes de Hese, which was written in 1381 and was patterned after Mandeville's book. It went on to say that Hese had reached terrestrial paradise and Eden's walls. Hese was said to have attended the court of Prester John, and viewed the body of St. Thomas in Hulna (a Kingdom in India).

There was also, in chapbook form, a treatise of the locations and sects of the Christians, giving brief accounts of Latin, Greek, Nestorian, Jacobite, Syrian Orthodox and other Christian factions. A separate category was given to Indians and their prince, Prester John. The rest of the chapbook included a fictitious letter from Sultan John of Babylon to Pope Pious II, as well as the Pope's (fabricated) reply.

In 1491 in Cologne, a printer by name of Cornelio da Zierikzee published in Latin the text of Prester John's letter and "De Adventu" as well as a treatise of the pontification of Prester John, from "Supplements Chronicarums" (Supplement to Chronicles) by an Italian monk, Jacopo Filippo Forest of Bergamo, which had first been published in 1483. Forest's work was a general history of the world in 11 volumes, including an abstract from Giovanne da Carignano, a 14th century geographer. Included in this work was an account of the life, customs and times of Prester John, based on a work by Poggio Bracciolini, secretary to Pope Eugenius IV. Bracciolini was an Italian histogragher who specialized in discovering lost texts by studying fragments of authors, then matching the writing styles to texts not already attributed to them.(15) His chief source for his work on Prester John was Niccolo di Conti, a Venetian merchant who had visited the tomb of St. Thomas. This account blended India and Ethiopia into one Christian realm, whose king and pope was Prester John.

Stories of Prester John continued to occupy chapbooks, poems and other literature. The most popular books of the 16th century may have been an anonymous work printed in Seville in 1515, detailing the fantasy travels of the Infante Don Pedro I of Portugal. Don Pedro was a son of King Joaa I. The book started with Don Pedro and twelve companions traveling through Venice, Cyprus and Greece; going from there on camel back to Norway; then to Babylon and the Holy Lands; to Armenia to look at Noah's Ark; to Egypt, Arabia and the Sinai; to Mecca to see Mohammed's coffin. Their travels presumably took them to the Amazon, inhabited by Christian women, who were the subjects of Prester John of the Indies; then to Judea; then the Indies, on a search for Prester John, who they found alive with a wife and son. They then returned home via the Red Sea and Morocco. This work continued to be published until the 18th century.

Endnotes

1. A tribe along the northern Chinese border, ruled by Toghrol Khan, allied with Temujin, who later became Chinghis Khan. The Secret History of the Mongols: The Origin of Chinghis Khan, Paul Kahn, North Point Press, San Francisco 1984
2. Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Charles Scribners Sons, NY 1951
3. Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol XIV, Robert Appleton Co., NY 1912
4. Acta Thomae, Apocryphal New Testament, Claremont Press, Oxford 1924
5. Historia Trium Regum by Johannes of Hildesheim, Sylvia Clare Harris, 1931, pub. London 1954
6. Otto of Freising Chronicum, G.H. Pertz, editor, 1867
7. The Realm of Prester John, Robert Silverberg, Doubleday & Co., NY 1972
8. The Devil's Horsemen: The Mongolian Invasion of Europe, James Chambers, Atheneum, NY 1979
9. See above.
10. The Quest for Cathay, Sir Percy Sykes, A&C Black, Ltd., London 1936
11. The Polos were in China 1275-1292, during which time they served in various capacities under Kubilai Khan. Marco served as governor of Yangchow, China

- for three years, and traveled extensively in Mongolia, China and India. Medieval People, Eileen Power, Harper & Row, NY 1963.
12. The Secret History of the Mongols, adapted by Paul Kahn, North Point Press, San Francisco, 1984.
 13. References to this were in the journal of Simon Sigoli, who visited Egypt in 1384, and reported that the Sultan of Egypt paid a yearly ransom to Prester John, a Christian potentate who lived in India. The homage was paid to keep Prester John from opening the river sluices and drowning Cairo and Alexandria.
 14. Also see the century journals of Odoric of Pordenone, John Marignolli, and John of Monte Corvino, who all served in various capacities in China during the mid-14th century.
 15. <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com>

Additional Sources

- Kublai Khan: Lord of Xanadu, Walter Chapman, Howard W. Sams & Co. 1966
- Silks, Spices and Empire Owen and Eleanor Lattimore, Delacorte Press, 1968
- Christian Mythology, George Every, Hamlyn Publisher's Group, Ltd., Feltham, Middlesex, England 1970
- The Saints, a Concise Biographical Dictionary, John Coulson, editor, Hawthorn Books NY 1957
- Butler's Lives of the Saints
- Church History in Plain Language
- The Christian World Social and Cultural History