

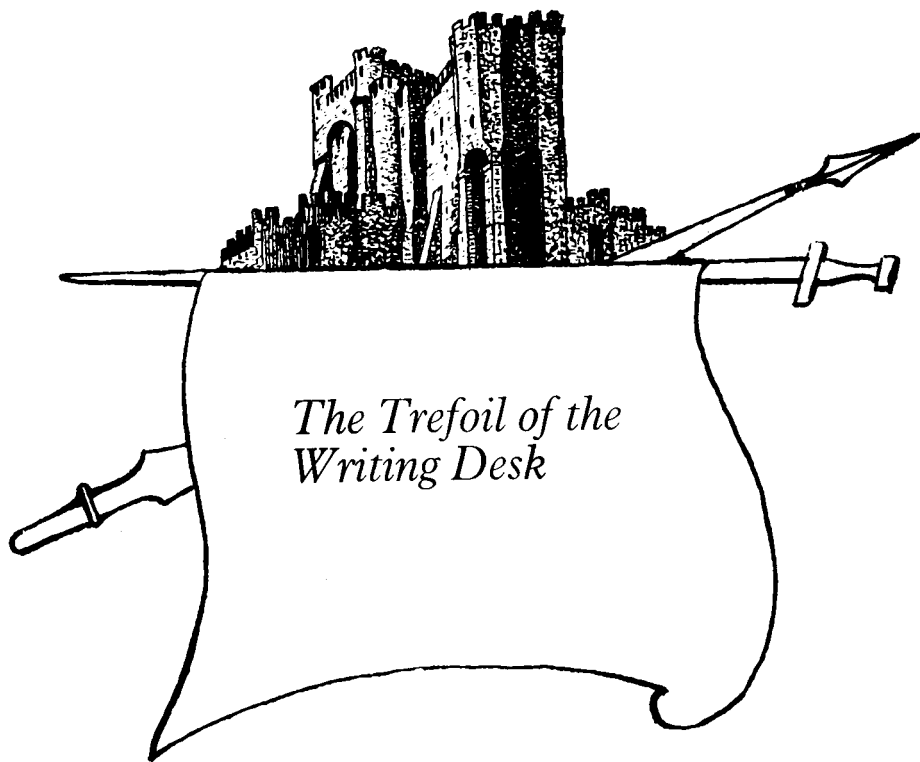
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978-0-521-10879-9 - Searches for an Imaginary Kingdom: The Legend of the Kingdom of Prester John

L. N. Gumilev

Excerpt

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1. *Overcoming the Study of Letters*

ON READING BOOKS

When your interest is aroused in some subject, when you want to know all about it – what it represents, how it is linked with its surroundings and what significance it has for me and my contemporaries – you look first of all for a suitable book where all this might be described. You hope that, reading it, you will find peace and be able to pass to other matters until the demon of curiosity again seizes your heart.

And so, I admit, I wanted terribly to know how the mighty empire of Chingiskhan suddenly arose in the desert steppes of Mongolia and, after a century, just as rapidly disappeared. Of course, I immediately set about finding a book, but what was my disappointment: there were more books than I could read in my entire life, but all the same there was no answer to the question.

It may be objected that I have no right to make such an assertion, since I admit that I have not read all the books. Fortunately, we have inherited something from medieval scholasticism – the system of footnotes and references. In reading a wide-ranging work, we can easily establish from the references what has been taken from where. The authors of such works are precise. If they could note from somewhere or other valuable information which would throw light on the cause of the rise of a world empire, they would have done so. Unfortunately, there is no such source, and I had to dig into the texts myself.

Yet there, too, disappointment lay in wait. The authors of some sources tell us that there was a large Christian kingdom in Asia prior to the rise of the Mongol Empire, but the authors of other sources from the same period are silent about this. I was totally lost. To satisfy my terrible curiosity I had to undertake a serious study of nomad history, putting all other matters aside.

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History is a delicate matter, though. If you simply gather information from various sources, it is usually contradictory. If you select only those items which agree with other information, they scatter like a pyramid of ball-bearings. They have to be bound, cemented, but there is nothing to do it with. Then I thought: let us take the conclusion, known to be correct, that Chinggiskhan lived and his Empire existed and that legend or supposition, known now to be dubious, that Prester John ruled in the 'Three Indias', and compare them and see what happens. Straightaway an organic conception results from such a combination, since there will be both positive and negative values. That is what I did. Now, let the reader judge how successful my attempt has been.

AN AUTHENTIC LIE

In 1145 a rumour ran through Western Romano-German, feudal and Catholic Europe shaking the imagination of kings and prelates, knights and merchants, noble ladies and fair courtesans, coarse provincial barons and the sailors of the Mediterranean fleets of Genoa, Venice and Pisa – in a word, of all who had even an indirect connection with the Second Crusade, then being prepared.

Otto of Friesing, the outstanding German historian, author of a world chronicle, *De duabus civitatibus*, and of the *Gesta Friderici imperatoris* (Barbarossa), left the following record: 'We also met the recently anointed Bishop of Gabul from Syria . . . He said that a few years ago a certain John, king and priest of the people living beyond the Persians and Armenians in the extreme Orient, professing Christianity, though of the Nestorian persuasion, marched in war against the two Samiard brothers, kings of the Medes and the Persians, and conquered their capital, Ecbatana [?!] . . . Victorious, the said John moved forward in order to come to the aid of the Holy Church. However, when he reached the Tigris and, for lack of boats, was unable to cross it, he marched north where, he had learnt, this river freezes over in winter. But spending several years there without avail, without the frost, and failing in his aim because of the warm weather, he was obliged to return to his native land, the more so since because of the bad climate he had lost many of his soldiers . . . Apart from this, they say that he is descended from the

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Magi¹ (i.e. the Magi of the Evangelist, who allegedly saw the star over Bethlehem and brought gifts to the new-born Jesus).

Similar information also appeared in other German chronicles.² Evidently, the information about the king-priest began to be regarded as genuine. New details were added to the legend: Prester John's letter to the Byzantine Emperor, Manuel Comnenus, appeared, apparently written in Arabic and then translated into Latin for the Pope and for the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. The Arabic original has not been preserved, but the version of the text which has reached us is as follows (in abbreviated form):

Prester John, by Almighty God and the Authority of our Lord Jesus Christ King of Kings, ruler of rulers, wishes his friend, Manuel, Prince of Constantinople, health and prosperity by God's mercy . . .³

This address alone may put the reader with any critical ability on his guard. John calls his vassals kings, but the sovereign lord Manuel Comnenus he calls Prince of Constantinople. Such obvious lack of respect, totally without cause, would have been followed, not by alliance and friendship, but by the breaking off of diplomatic relations. But the author of the letter, the forger, knew his audience. In the Catholic West the humiliation, even imaginary, of the Orthodox Emperor of Byzantium was accepted as something that went without saying and did not involve any distrust of the text, but would have simply helped matters.

Prester John goes on to describe his kingdom which he calls the 'Three Indias' and names his capital as Suza. Only a reader totally ignorant of ancient geography could fail to notice that the author of the letter himself understands nothing of it.

Of course, in Constantinople they paid not the slightest attention to this cock-and-bull story; but it never entered the head of the twelfth-century West European reader that the wool was being pulled over his eyes.

It is highly noteworthy that 'Prester John' considered it his duty to describe all the living creatures of his kingdom, beginning with the most exotic animals from the point of view of a European:

¹ *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum*, rec. A. Hofmeister, Hannover-Leipzig, 1913, 365f., cited from R. Khennig, *Nevdomye zemli*, II, 441.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

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'elephants, dromedaries, camels, *meta collinarum* (?), *cametennus* (?), *tinserete*, panthers, forest asses, white and red lions, white bears, white whittings (?), cicadas, eagle gryphons, . . . horned men, one-eyed ones, men with eyes back and front, centaurs, fauns, satyrs, pygmies, giants, cyclops, the phoenix and almost all sorts of animals which dwell on earth . . .'⁴

Where did the author of the letter take this list from? Only from medieval phantasies, since this genre never died. It is absolutely astonishing that this nonsense was believed, and continued to be so, for more than five hundred years, but such is the power of the word included in an 'authentic source', and that was what the letter was. That was why, on 27 September 1177, Pope Alexander III gave a long missive to the physician-in-ordinary, Master Philip, for the 'king-pontiff John'. The emissary and the letter were despatched from Venice immediately. But where to? The location of the extensive and great Christian kingdom in the Far East was unknown and all attempts to find it were unsuccessful. It could not have been otherwise – the kingdom of the eastern Christians did not exist.

The Europeans were long unwilling to come to terms with their disappointment, but they were obliged to. Neither in India, nor in Abyssinia, nor in China was anything found similar to John's kingdom which had been described in such detail. In the nineteenth century it only remained for historians to explain the reasons for the forgery and for the credulity of their ancestors. Yet even now historical critical method does not always differ in principle from that of the middle ages; moreover, both truth and falsehood are always mixed together, though in different proportions.

There is no smoke without fire, and there is now no doubt that the cause of the rumour was an actual event: the defeat of the forces of the Seljuk sultan Sanjar by the levies of the Central Asian tribes, united under the Khitan Gurkhan Ye-lü Dashi, on the plain of Katwan in 1141.⁵ Probably there were Nestorians among the nomads, yet if Ye-lü Dashi had a particular religious sympathy, it

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The literature on the problem of 'pontiff John' is enormous, but it has now lost its significance, since this problem has been solved by V. V. Bartol'd (*O khristianstve v Turkestane*, 25; cp. I. P. Magidovich, introductory article to *Kniga Marko Polo*, 5–11). The history of the question has been given in R. Khennig (*Nevedomye zemli*, II, 446–61), but in his commentary he makes gross errors in the history of east Central Asia which have, in part, been noted by the editor (446–8).

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was only to Buddhism. His forces did not reach the Tigris, they did not attempt to; his kingdom was small, encompassing only the land of the Seven Streams [Southeast of Lake Balkhash – trans.], part of Dzungaria and the southern slopes of the Altai; John's name has not been established among those of the Khitan lords, nor has anything been found in Asia similar to the luxuriant inventions of the medieval Europeans.⁶ So we immediately have two big problems: (1) what was there really? (2) since an authentic source gives information known to be false, have we the right to trust our sources in general, and, if not, how are we to get reliable information? It is these two questions that we are trying to answer in this book.

DIFFICULTIES ARISING

Fortunately, our predecessors have done no mean work on the history of the middle ages. This is to be understood in the sense that the sequence of most events in political history has been established; wars, treaties, diplomatic and dynastic alliances, laws and social reforms have been dated. In other words, we already have a canvas which may be embellished in various ways and used to contradict or cast doubt on information the absurdity of which strikes one in the eye – including the tale of the 'pontiff-king John'.

But there are also so many events that it is impossible to see them at a glance or to recall and retain them in the memory. It is usual here to proceed by means of narrow specialisation, studying a single country in one comparatively short period. Yet it was this path that led the medieval chroniclers to accept the absurd information about John, information which was not retained in the arsenal of Byzantine and old Russian scholarship because Greeks and Russians, closer to Asia, knew it better than did contemporary Germans or French. Consequently the path of narrowing specialisation results in the researcher being blinkered, and a lack of perspective leads to no fewer faults than lack of depth.

Our theme, then, demands the widest sweep of history in the lands where Nestorianism arose, developed and perished, i.e.

⁶ Cp. the spurious text of the 'letter of Prester John' to Manuel Comnenus (1143–80), emperor of Byzantium (R. Khennig, *Nevedomye zemli*, II, 442–3). There is also a mention of the alleged correspondence of the Emperor Manuel with 'Prester John' in the Old Russian 'Tale of the Indian Kingdom' (Yu. K. Begunov, *Pamyatnik russkoi literatury XII veka 'Slovo o pogibeli Russkoi zemli'*), 101.

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almost a thousand years in the history of Asia from the sea of Marmora to the Yellow Sea. To bear in mind all the events relating to our concerns is only possible if we locate them in a system specially adapted for this purpose. Since there is no such system, we have to invent one, at the same time remembering that its purpose is purely to be an aid.

The material we require to reach a conclusion may be obtained in two ways: (1) directly from the sources, i.e. the writings of those contemporary to the events, and (2) from summary histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The second method has a number of advantages: it is less burdensome; the medieval texts and versions have already been criticised and it makes no sense to do this again unless it is called for; events have been marshalled in causal and sequential series and this eases our task of interpretation, and, finally, the reader can without difficulty follow the course of our reasoning and check whether our conclusions are correct. Alas, however, we must not limit ourselves in this manner, for if everything was as fortunate as this in historiography, problems such as we have encountered, and will encounter again more than once, would not have arisen. Thus, we shall be obliged to turn to the sources again and again, not from the point of view of textology or an examination of the literature, but to check the reliability of that information giving rise to doubts or distrust. The language or literature student of the sources strives to answer the question: what does this author say? But the history-student of the sources is interested in different questions: what is true of that which the author tells us, what has he left out and how were things in actual fact? The difference is obvious.

There is a very widespread view that error or inadequacy in a conclusion is accounted for by superficial study of the source. This implicitly supposes that the sources available to scholars contain all that is needed for a complete knowledge of the subject. One has only to translate with the utmost accuracy the work of a medieval author and retell it in one's own words for any problem connected with the work to be resolved. This view is nowhere specially formulated, but it exists as an assumption of something obvious and not subject to review. This leaves out of account that the historian blindly following the sources merely reproduces the ancient author's viewpoint, not the true position of the matter, which was often unclear to the ancient author himself. In such an approach,

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criticism of the sources amounts to establishing their authenticity; but the contradictions of several undoubtedly authentic sources form a barrier not always overcome. However could it be overcome when it is recommended, say in our case, that we should reject all modern and ancient research on the history of Mongolia and translate afresh the Arab, Persian, Greek, Chinese, Mongol, Latin, Georgian and Armenian sources without repeating a single one of our predecessors and, finally, put forward another hypothesis with no certainty that it will be better than the former ones?

This path did not attract me, primarily because I could not summon up the courage to declare that my translations (were I to do them) would be better and more accurate than those made by the most brilliant and learned specialists. On the contrary, the historian, having his own point of view, will always go for the translation confirming it. It does not matter at all whether he consciously selects the variants that suit him, or honestly believes that that is how things were. Even striving to be more literal is not expedient; a literal translation is far from always the most exact one, since it leaves out nuances of sense and tone which signify much more in a literary work than verb forms or turns of syntax.

The main fault of this method, though, is that research into the subject is replaced by study of the texts dealing with it. What interests us is the Nestorian problem, not what contemporaries wrote about it.

Facts extracted by criticism from a source rarely allow us to make out the course of events, because many important events are always omitted in the sources, while insignificant ones are overemphasised. The Old Testament can serve as an example. If we read nothing else, we cannot doubt that the whole history of the Near East in the first millennium B.C. revolved around Israel and Judea. In fact, as we now well know, Israel and Judea were the back of beyond in the Near Eastern world whose historical fate was at this time determined by quite different peoples and states.

In just the same way it follows from the 'Song of Roland' that Roland's heroic death in unequal battle with the Moors was the chief event in Charlemagne's first campaign in Spain in 778. But we know that, in general, there was no such battle and that Roland in fact was killed by the Basques, not the Moors, in the gorge at Roncesvalles. Yet such a blatant distortion of events does not prevent the 'Song of Roland' being a first class historical source, just as

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it does not prevent the 'Lay of Igor's Host' being such, although Prince Igor's campaign against the Polovtsy in 1185 described in it took place in quite a different way than is depicted in the 'epic'.⁷

Therefore, an analysis is essential and this is expediently done by means of a synchronic selection of the facts, so that it is easy to disclose exaggerations and omissions in the sources, as well as gaps in the general picture. The latter can be filled only by interpolation, filling in the rough outline of events drawn from the sources with the help of causal and sequential links.⁸ With the interpolations, naturally, exactitude is reduced, but the allowance to be made is not great and the general line is not violated, but in the opposite case it is quite lost. The subsequent operation is synthesis: the comparison of the historical outline obtained with analogous series of facts similarly established in contiguous fields of study. Synthesis means establishing similarities and dissimilarities and explaining both, which is the aim of the research.

Thus, our chain of methods has four links: (1) how (was it written)? (2) what (was it really)? (3) why (did it take place in that way)? and (4) what was the point? – the final product of the work.

I hasten to add in order to forestall a possible – no, inescapable – criticism based on a failure to understand my approach fully. I am not against translating old texts again, I even favour it, but I consider it an inexcusable luxury not to take account of what precisely such heavy and complex work may bring. It varies. Repeated and parallel translations are extremely desirable for elegant literature. Every translator transmits the aesthetic, stylistic nuances and shades of meaning he notices. Here no duplication can arise, because an artistic translation always differs from the original and from an analogous translation, especially one made several generations earlier. Here language, too, as a system of associations and reflexes, is significant, and we know that our forefathers spoke, even if only a little, yet somewhat differently from ourselves.

Translation of business affairs is a different matter. Here, if terminology is not involved, style changes neither sense nor meaning. Whatever expressions were used to describe the defeat, let us say, of the Russians on the river Kalka, the fact will not be altered and

⁷ L. N. Gumilev, 'Les Mongols du XII^e siècle et le Slovo o polku Igoreve', *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétiques*, vol. vii, 1966, 37–57.

⁸ L. N. Gumilev, 'Rol' klimaticheskikh kolebanii . . .', *Istoriya SSSR*, 1967, No. 1.

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the dead princes will not be resurrected. Such a translation is good enough for our analysis, and we should restrict ourselves to such to be able to weigh pros and contras impartially.

As for terms (names of ranks, clans, military forces, toponyms, ethonyms etc.), in uncovering them the language specialist will be unable to help the historian unless the latter is able to feel his own way, relying not on the etymology of individual words, but on the complex of events in descriptions of which these difficult words are found in different contexts. That is why we shall look at the problem of 'Pope John' not as a problem of texts, but as one of twelfth-century historical reality for which the question of Oriental Christianity, however odd it may seem, is crucial.

ON THE TRACK OF RESEARCH ROUTES

The question of how to write a 'history' has not been resolved, and never will be. Moreover, there is no need for a solution because prescriptions in this case will do more harm than good. It is quite impossible to imagine that two contemporary researchers working on a single period, even if in complete agreement in interpreting the events and evaluating the phenomena, would treat the subject in identical fashion, since each would pay more attention to the subjects closer to his academic interests. It is this variety which aids objective perception of the historical process which arises before the reader in various perspectives and, thus, more fully.

The form, style and language of a historical account is determined by the author's intended audience: scholarly specialists, or the general reader interested in the research subject. In the first case an extremely detailed analysis of complex problems, for which the author suggests a solution, is necessary; the account of the course of events is reduced to a minimum, since it is known to specialists; and dry, business-like language is characteristic, since the focus is on the proof and the history of the problem. Such a book is, in essence, nothing but an extended article.

In the second case, the author devotes more attention to historical synthesis, relying on analytical works by means of footnotes. There is no purpose in repeating the arguments of the articles cited since this deprives the reader of following the author's line of thought. An account of the development of events becomes decisively significant, because that is where, as in a telescope, the