

Introduction

For more than six centuries, missionaries and merchants, historians and poets, sought the legendary *rex et sacerdos* Prester John in the places where European desires for a globalized Christianity were most acutely aroused.¹ From the twelfth into the twenty-first century, the Latin Christian desire for a universal sovereign who guaranteed the continuity of Christianity outside of Europe's borders evolved into one of the world's most enduring myths. Prester John not only represented a distal military ally poised to defend Christendom but also embodied the hope that the heretofore unknown parts of the globe would be revealed to Latin Christians as extensions of the world that biblical and classical geographical authorities had foretold. The search for Prester John stressed the ideologies that his potential existence portended more than it focused on the geopolitical and sociocultural realities that the search for his kingdom unveiled. For these reasons, long after it was realistic to imagine his historical existence, writers continued to imagine Prester John's origin and arrival.

Was Prester John the "Nestorian" Patriarch of "Eastern" Christians,² the King of "Greater India," a political allegory of effectively shared sacred and secular rule, a messianic ruler of a religio-cultural heterotopia, the Latinized title of the Solomonic line of Ethiopian sovereigns, a Crusader intent on defending the Holy Land, the Dalai Lama? Writers postulated the existence of Prester John's kingdom in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, India, China, Mongolia, Tibet, Russia, Ethiopia, Benin, Sudan, and Japan, among other places. Indirectly and directly, the desire to find Prester John's kingdom helped shape Europe's notion of what the wider world looked like, even as emerging global realities subverted the expectations that had initially produced belief in Prester John.

The Global Legend of Prester John offers an overview of six distinct narrative paths the legend forged and examines the narrative mechanisms that encouraged writers and adventurers throughout Europe to continually imagine Prester John at the horizons of their known world. This feat of narrative endurance is grounded in a number of factors, including the legend's ambiguous historical foundations, the lack of communication among contemporaneous world travelers, the permeability of medieval generic constraints, not to mention the sheer desire, shared among explorers, thinkers, and writers, to

¹ Portions of this Element derive from Taylor (2023).

² Colloquially considered the de facto Christianity of the East, now considered the Assyrian Church, Nestorianism was labeled heresy by the Catholic Church primarily due to its Christological belief in dyophysitism, which asserted that Christ possessed separate human and divine natures, only loosely united. It was a canonical heresy, anathematized as early as the Council of Ephesus (431) and Council of Chalcedon (450), after having developed from the ideas of Nestorius (d. 450) and being disseminated by the School of Edessa.

assimilate a whole world's worth of encountered difference into a tidy Christian framework. Moving through the legend's narrative paths, I distinguish two abiding features evident in the narrative treatments of Prester John: malleability and elasticity.

The central text of the Prester John legend is itself one of literary history's most enduring texts, a constantly changing narrative that circulated in more than a dozen different languages by the early modern period. This letter allegedly penned by Prester John himself survives in varying iterations (classified by scholars as separate "interpolations") in an astonishing 469 extant manuscripts (234 Latin and 235 vernacular).³ The enormous popularity of *The Letter of Prester John* (*LOPJ* hereafter) helps contextualize the legend's cultural influence across Europe, while the variations within its transmission history testify to its malleability and wide applicability. Taken seriously as both a piece of entertainment and an instructional document, the *LOPJ* interacted with (and helped bridge) history and literature for 600 years. Maps featured Prester John's kingdom to reference what the "New" world looked like. Missionaries and explorers employed the physical and cultural landmarks of the *LOPJ* to help identify his kingdom's location. Writers assimilated Prester John into the Arthurian and Charlemagnian literary worlds. Literary worlds, in turn, borrowed from the *LOPJ* to lend verisimilitude to their descriptions of the periphery of Europe's known world (Putter, 1999: 93).

Versions of the *LOPJ* have been expertly edited,⁴ sequenced,⁵ translated,⁶ philologized,⁷ sourced,⁸ and analyzed.⁹ There is still more exciting work to be done on the *LOPJ*; it was for centuries a kind of living text. On the other hand, scholarly assessments of the texts that helped perpetuate the legend – texts that affirm who Prester John was and was not, texts that seek out his kingdom on three continents, texts that integrate him into other narrative universes – have been comparatively underexamined. Brewer's *Prester John: The Legend and Its Sources* (2015) masterfully collects, compiles, and translates many of these accounts. This resource has helped me identify some exciting patterns that

³ Brewer (2015: 299–319); Wagner (2000: 21–149).

⁴ Zarncke (1879: 872–908); Gosman (1982); Ullendorff and Beckingham (1982); Wagner (2000).

⁵ Zarncke (1879: 827–870); Wagner (2000); Ramos (2006: 29–36); Chiesa (2023).

⁶ English translations of varied manuscripts of the *LOPJ* include Ross (1926: 174–178); Slessarev (1959: 67–79); Vitale (1975: 62–124); Ullendorff and Beckingham (1982: 37–146); Uebel (2005: 155–160); Brewer (2015: 67–91).

⁷ Vitale (1975: 39–61, 137–144); Wagner (2000).

⁸ Letts (1945); Nowell (1953); Ullendorff and Beckingham (1982: 153–160); Hamilton (1996a: 177–180); Ramos (2006: 39).

⁹ Olschki (1931); Slessarev (1959: 32–54); Silverberg (1972: 40–73); Ullendorff and Beckingham (1982: 161–172); Uebel (2005: 89–122); Ramos (2006: 37–44).

emerge when tracing the relationships among and between the texts of the Prester John corpus. Such texts, here called Prester John narratives, merit closer attention for two overarching reasons. First, they evidence the cultural reception of Prester John, which, in turn, helps contextualize the various narrative paths that the legend built. Second, these stories keep the legend alive, continually producing new ways for Prester John to affect Christian Europe's economic and political future. Tracing such an evolution shows how the legend of Prester John reflects several of the ideologies that mobilize Europe's entrance into a globally interconnected world.

Methods and Key Terms

This Element is designed for nonspecialists and curious researchers who may have crossed paths with the legend in their studies. I am aware that, for especially those unacquainted with the themes of medieval and early modern history and literature, the sheer number of geographical, biographical, theological, and cultural references may threaten to impede understanding of the Prester John myth. Even Charles Beckingham, the veteran researcher of the legend, teased that its study is “as inexhaustible as any scholar's appetite is insatiable” (Beckingham, 1996: 22). Therefore, in addition to providing an overview of the writers and narratives that the legend of Prester John influenced, this Element offers an interactive experience that allows readers to learn more about any point of interest encountered in the course of reading this text.

In this capacity, the Element draws on my work on The International Prester John Project (IPJP).¹⁰ This digital platform hosted by the Global Middle Ages Project (G-MAP) began as an attempt to better understand the transmission of the Prester John legend across space and time.¹¹ I have since spent a decade collecting and organizing six centuries' worth of Prester John lore into a hybrid narrative and digital archive designed to function as a user-friendly resource on this legend. For e-readers of this Element, many texts, figures, and key ideas mentioned in what follows are hyperlinked to a corresponding page at IPJP, which provides additional context, analysis, and references to the pages of related texts, along with visualizations.¹² Such a format lets me continuously update contextual references to give this creaturely legend a living framework.

¹⁰ The International Prester John Project: How A Global Legend Was Created across Six Centuries (online), <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/prester-john/>.

¹¹ Global Middle Ages [online], <http://globalmiddleages.org/>.

¹² For print readers, please see the online Appendix hosted on a separate Cambridge University Press webpage to find URLs for hyperlinked pages. This Appendix contains an alphabetically organized accounting of pages referenced in this Element. Readers of both print and digital editions of this Element can also utilize the search bar within the International Prester John Project to locate any texts, authors, or ideas referenced in it.

These individual pages on IPJP provide readers with a more thorough overview and contextualization of texts, which are then tagged with all other Prester John pages that reference them. For example, clicking on (or searching for) Otto of Freising's *Historia de Duabus Civitatibus* not only provides additional historical background and scholarly assessment of the narrative but also contains embedded links to a number of related texts, navigates to thematic collections of narratives that concern Otto's chronicle ("Popes and Prester John"; "Prester John and 'Nestorianism'"; "Chronicles and Prester John"), and provides bibliographical references. This is the case for nearly all names, texts, and themes in this Element, whether or not they are hyperlinked. The primary purpose of this Element is to provide an achronological, thematically organized overview of a remarkably durable legend, but when supplemented with IPJP, I hope to also afford readers an opportunity to get lost in the archive of the massive Prester John corpus.

This Element represents the results of studying the patterns I have observed in putting together the IPJP archive. I have now cataloged hundreds of generically diverse texts written by authors of varied backgrounds, each attempting to add a sliver of clarity to the mysteries and promises teased within the *LOPJ*. Because of the diverse backgrounds of those who wrote on the legend, Prester John comes to serve often contradictory historical and ideological roles: Lord of Greater India, Ethiopian monarch, "Nestorian" Mongol,¹³ inherited title, literary character, utopian myth, and overblown rumor. In roughly the same decade that Wolfram von Eschenbach integrated Prester John into Arthuriana by making him the son of Feirefiz (Parzival's biracial half-brother), Jacques de Vitry prophesied the arrival of King David, the son or grandson of Prester John, as a potential savior to help the Christian army of the Fifth Crusade defeat Islam once and for all. To better explain the legend's expansions and contradictions, I distinguish two salient features of the legend that help account for its longevity: the elastic return to the legend's primary concerns across centuries of Prester John narratives and, relatedly, the malleability of the legend's epistemological framework. While it is not possible to neatly categorize all the variations one encounters in these Prester John narratives, in this Element I identify six distinct but permeable narrative paths that the legend followed, each of which contributes to a larger coherence by returning to these motifs of elasticity and malleability.

¹³ Although I am aware that contemporary scholars have called attention to the inaccuracy of the term "Nestorian" to describe members of the Assyrian or East Syrian Church, I employ the outdated term throughout the Element due to its close association with Prester John in several centuries of texts. For a fuller accounting of the term, please see the IPJP page on Nestorianism.

The sheer variety of Prester John narrative styles, from skeptical dismissals to alleged firsthand encounters, attests to the malleability of this legend. That malleability, combined with Prester John's imagined movement from Asia to Africa and back, is made possible by the variety of ideological commitments that the legend trafficked among and between: xenophobia,¹⁴ solipsism,¹⁵ hybridity,¹⁶ apocalypticism,¹⁷ messianism,¹⁸ utopianism,¹⁹ among others. Travelers, writers, and readers from the thirteenth century forward were left with a legend that not only absorbed contradiction but encouraged revision. This is what I refer to as the legend's malleable narrative framework.

By elasticity here I mean that regardless of the shape a Prester John narrative took, the narrative paths "spring back" to the legend's initial configuration. This initial configuration of the legend is marked by four foundational themes: Latin Christendom's perceived need for outside assistance against foreign threats (Christian and otherwise), the receipt of some sort of future-directed pledge for assistance to aid against those threats, the attempts to enclose such threats within a larger Catholic framework, and the larger desire for the unknown parts of the world to be revealed as an extension of what was already familiar and known (Taylor, 2011).²⁰ Prester John remained entangled in Catholic Europe's understanding of its place in the world because it was adaptable to many contexts (malleability) and because the throughline crises and existential threats that produced the legend were never satisfactorily resolved (elasticity).

Finally, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by a Prester John "narrative" and "narrative path." For the purposes of this Element, a Prester John narrative is a text that features Prester John (or one of his common aliases) and offers an implicit or overt commentary on one or more of the legend's foundational themes. The term "narrative path" then refers to a group of Prester John narratives that share a common feature, whether of identification (Mongol or Crusader, for instance) or function (such as literary figure). This method of organization helps avoid the pitfalls that attend a chronological organization of Prester John stories, since one of the most interesting features of the legend is how often contradictory versions of the legend were being disseminated

¹⁴ Tolan shows how medieval xenophobia was often framed as ideological antagonism toward heresy (Tolan, 2002: 135–169); cf. Taylor (2011).

¹⁵ Uebel (2005: 93–102); Niayesh (2012: 158).

¹⁶ Uebel (1996: 274–282); Akbari (2012: 189–199).

¹⁷ Tolan (2002: 194–213); Ramos (2006: 202–210); Brooks (2010: 26–50).

¹⁸ Audlin (2015); Mantonavi (2023).

¹⁹ Olschki (1937); Helleiner (1959); Stromholm (1984); Bejczy (2001); Uebel (2001).

²⁰ This impulse is evident in the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the first Latin translation (and refutation) of the Qur'an (1143), as well as in the military strategies of the Second Crusade.

simultaneously. In choosing the term “path,” I also deliberately avoid discussion of genre, a modern construct, which is not only quite fluid throughout the Middle Ages but also obscures some of the interesting connections evident across different narrative forms. As I hope to show, these narrative paths are at once distinct and permeable.

Rather than create neat historical or generic categories to delineate different eras of the Prester John legend, this Element will focus on the ways that communities – Crusade advocates, Franciscan missionaries, Italian merchants, Portuguese viceroys, Hebrew scholars, armchair sinologists, Ethiopian courts, papal syndicates – patterned stories about Prester John around specific features of his character that then signaled some political, economic, and/or cultural utility. Each section will discuss the genealogy and transmission of one narrative path as a means of understanding how the legend of Prester John was able to thrive and evolve for centuries despite a proliferation of contradictory descriptions and a lack of evidence concerning his material existence.

Prester John and the Global Middle Ages

Before moving on to a discussion of the Prester John legend’s foundational themes, it is necessary to assess to what degree Prester John, an imaginary priest-king who mattered almost exclusively for Latin Europe, can be considered a “global” figure. A simple, unsatisfying answer is to report all the places where medieval and early modern Europeans sought Prester John’s kingdom: from the Asian Steppe to India, China, Russia, Tibet, and Japan; from Nubia, Benin, and Ethiopia to Columbus’ “New World.”

Such a Eurocentric view of early globalism privileges a Latin Christian experience with and response to intercultural connection. A representative perspective is attested in a 1710 English translation of Portuguese Jesuit historian Balthazar Téllez’s *The Travel of the Jesuits in Ethiopia* (1660), which summarizes what Portugal had itself gained from the world in its search for Prester John (qtd. in Brewer, 2015: 241):

The Portuguese Nation having extended their Discoveries and Conquests along the Coasts of Africk, and proceeded thence to the, before unknown, remotest Eastern Shores; Europe was not only enrich’d with the precious Spices and other valuable Commodities of those Parts; but improv’d with the Knowledge of new Monarchies and Empires, Spacious Provinces, Wealthy and Large Islands, Warlike Nations, and variety of Countries, to which the ablest Cosmographers were before utter Strangers; so that we may say, the World is beholding to the Portugueses for this increase of Wealth, and addition of Extent.

In such a view, it is the world itself that benefits from the European extraction and acquisition of Africa's and Asia's resources and knowledge: global access understood as a means of proto-nationalist self-empowerment. While certainly worthy of study, this vantage on globality routinely offers a myopic and/or overly bellicose perspective: intercultural exchanges couched in terms of conquest, heresy, access, legend, a missionary eye. On the other hand, the global history of Prester John makes evident the way Latin Christendom gathered the slow trickle of global news that entered Europe, often through the Mediterranean, and then filtered such tidings through an inherited ideological framework that reflected desires for a globalized Christendom. And yet the terrestrial and textual excursions to seek Prester John's kingdom did, in fact, open up Europe's engagement with the wider world, encouraging reciprocated diplomatic missions and inaugurating new intercultural communication from cultures across Asia and Africa. An important vector in Europe's attempt to enter a global information economy, Prester John remained poised at key moments in this history of globalization, tied up with proto-colonial excursions to the Indian subcontinent, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Americas.

In addition to its influence on Europe's vision of the wider world, the story of Prester John's textual migrations engages with key themes in the historiography of global history. The legend aligns well with the so-called vectors of connectivity that have been identified as essential to the wider project of global history: diffusion, outreach, dispersal, expansion, and attraction (Belich, Darwin, and Wickham, 2016: 3–23). The notions of dispersal and expansion merit comment as an effective parallel framework for my concept of elasticity. The authors liken these two forces to “a stretched rubber band, which either breaks into fragments or remains intact” (p. 5). One way to put in perspective the irrational longevity of the Prester John legend is to understand it as a rubber band that continuously expanded as it was stretched but almost always “snapped back” to its initial shape.

Finally, this is a legend globally studied from a wide variety of academic lenses. It was once nearly only academic historians of medieval Latin Europe who studied Prester John. However, in the twenty-first century, interest in this legend has steadily grown, and the collective understanding of its impacts has been made clearer by researchers from an expanding variety of academic specialties. This phenomenon was well-represented by a 2023 conference at Sapienza University of Rome entitled “Retelling Prester John: Frontiers, Routes, and Emotions of a Failed Encounter,” based on a bilingual issue of *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* (ed. Ferrara, 2023), which featured scholars from disciplines and specialties that include literary studies, anthropology, the history of religions, world mythologies, medieval Latin philology, crusading

history, Greek studies, Jewish philosophy, Syrian literature, Byzantine and Islamic history, late Ottoman history, and Tibetan studies, among other specialties. As often as possible, I defer to such experts.

After a brief treatment of the legend's foundational texts and themes, this Element proceeds along the following six paths: "Prester John as Crusader"; "Prester John as Mongol"; "Prester John as African Monarch"; "Pop History Prester John"; "Prester John as Literary Figure"; and "False Etymologies, Prester John as a Title, and the Dalai Lama." The paths themselves focus on the specific narrative features that distinguished that version of Prester John, and they will also discuss textual features that attest to an abiding preoccupation with the foundational themes of the legend established in the twelfth century. Following these sections is a coda on race in the Prester John legend with a concluding discussion of two twentieth-century Prester John narratives that help clarify this legend's place in modernity.

Before moving on to the path sections themselves, the following section reexamines the initial context of the Prester John legend to establish four abiding thematic features of the Prester John story that reemerge across the six narrative paths.

Foundational Texts and Themes

Patriarch John

As is well-rehearsed, the traditional beginnings of the Prester John legend involve four core texts: two 1122 narratives that mention the arrival to Rome of an Indian Archbishop of St. Thomas Christians who presides over annual miracles; the retelling of a historically mistranslated 1145 anecdote regarding a puissant so-called Nestorian Christian who has announced intentions to defend the Holy Land (1157); and the legend's central narrative, the boastful, ever-expanding compendium of European lore about the wider world's marvels known as *The Letter of Prester John* (c. 1165). These four texts establish a range of possibilities concerning the identity and intentions of the mysterious priest-king: a figure of some historical repute but one also who traffics in the moth-eaten imaginings of a millennium's worth of European writing on the "Orient."

In the first of these 1122 texts, commonly referred to as *De adventu*, a man hailing from India known as Patriarch John arrives to the *curia* of Pope Calixtus II (r. 1119–1124) in Rome.²¹ Introducing himself to the pope, John reports the vast

²¹ John had originally traveled to Constantinople to seek recognition as the new Patriarch of the Indies. There he came into contact with a papal embassy sent to negotiate the reunification of the churches after the Great Schism (1054). John then traveled to Rome with the Catholic embassy.