Visual Representations of Prester John and His Kingdom

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The mythical figure of the priest-king known to late medieval and early modern Europeans as Prester John fascinated literate Europeans for many centuries. Historians have weighed in on textual depictions of the legendary figure, but visual interpretations by European artists of the physical appearance of this eastern potentate have not been examined in any significant depth. These portrayals primarily took the form of map and book illustrations, and this essay examines the evolving visual representations that European artists developed of Prester John. In general, there was a gradual evolution over time in European artistic depictions of the legendary Prester John, and changes in European portrayals of reflected concurrent changes in European understandings of Africa and Asia.

Commenting on the textual validity and accuracy of early European accounts of the Americas, Stephen Greenblatt notes that the only certainty scholars can derive from these works is that they “can be certain only that European representations of the New World tell us something about the European practice of representation.”\(^1\) These are also useful guidelines to follow in examining the visual representations that late medieval and early modern Europeans created with regard to the legendary Prester John. The mythical priest-king spawned a wide variety of literary and cartographical works that elaborated on the many facets believed by Europeans to be found in Prester John’s legendary kingdom. Concurrent with the mythical rhetoric is a significant body of visual interpretations of the physical appearance of this eastern potentate by European artists. These primarily took the form of map and book illustrations. This essay examines the evolving visual representations that European artists developed of Prester John.

In general, there was a gradual evolution over time in European artistic depictions of the legendary Prester John. Earlier images tended to illustrate the mythical priest-king with facial features and skin colors similar to Europeans, while later representations began

\(^1\) Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions, 7.
to depict Prester John with the more “exotic” features imagined to be associated with people in Africa or eastern Asia. Yet there are a few exceptions to this generalization, and visual depictions by European artists of Prester John reflected their creators’ own assumptions about the manner in which Prester John was portrayed. Many of these depictions tell modern observers more about the ways the European artists wanted Prester John to look as opposed to what these artists thought he looked like.

This article examines a series of scanned images from texts representative of the body of late medieval and early modern literature related to the legend of Prester John. Relevant images are then analyzed for evidence of particular cultural biases as well as indicators of assumptions that the requisite illustrators may have possessed as they created their depictions of Prester John and his mythical kingdom.

The Map of Fra Mauro (1459)

Among the most significant late medieval visual representations of the kingdom of Prester John are those found in the mappamundi created by Fra Mauro, a fifteenth century Camaldolese monk and mapmaker in Venice. King Afonso V of Portugal commissioned Mauro to create this cartographic masterpiece, though the copy sent to Portugal has not survived. In one lengthy inscription Mauro claimed that he used Portuguese maps from fifteenth century explorations of the Atlantic coast in the preparation of his mappamundi. This makes perfect sense, as his Portuguese connections meant that Mauro had access to the most advanced geographical and navigational information of the middle fifteenth century. The Mauro map serves as a kind of intellectual barometer that measures the state of late medieval European beliefs about global geography.

Mauro’s map is a circular planisphere drawn on parchment that has been set by curators in a wooden frame, and the entire map stretches about six feet in diameter. The map is oriented with the

2 Falchetta, Introduction.
3 Summers, 106.
south at the top and the east on the right as the viewer stands in front of it, as seen below:

*Figure 1 - Front view of Fra Mauro map*

The land of “Abassia” (Mauro’s term for Abyssinia), which Mauro identified in his map as the central region of the immense kingdom of Prester John, merited considerable textual attention on the parchment by the cartographer-friar. Abassia is depicted in the map with large castles and palaces that exceed those of any other African potentate in opulence, size, and quantity. In addition, the country of Abassia possessed agricultural wealth to match its royal prosperity, and the following Mauro inscription is reminiscent of Paradise in its expression of the earthly splendor and bountiful harvests in Prester John’s realm:
In the woods of this Abassia there is such a great quantity of honey that they do not bother to collect it. When in the winter the great rains wash these trees, that honey flows into some nearby lakes and, thanks to the action of the sun, that water becomes like a wine, and the people of the place drink it in place of wine.⁴

Likely anticipating that some of the information about the continent of Africa contained in his map might be criticized by others, Mauro included an inscription on the map that outlined his arguments against such criticisms. The Venetian mapmaker argued that his map drew from some of the best available sources, and that classical geographers simply possessed outdated knowledge. In the following passage Mauro defended his work and offered readers a brief summary of the sources that he used in the preparation of his mappamundi:

⁴ Mauro, 10-I 26. The alphanumeric codes used in the following Fra Mauro footnotes refer to the standard coordinates assigned in the 1956 edition of the map.
Because to some it will appear as a novelty that I should speak of these southern parts, which were almost unknown to the Ancients, I will reply that this entire drawing, from Sayto upwards, I have had from those who were born there. These people are clerics who, with their own hands, drew for me these provinces and cities and rivers and mountains with their names; all these things I have not been able to put in due order for lack of space.

In this aesthetically appealing and highly detailed map, Mauro provided quite a few inscriptions that offer insights into the nature of the contemporary European views about Prester John’s kingdom. Mauro wrote that “Prester John has more than 120 kingdoms under his dominion, in which there are more than 60 different languages.” Indeed, the mapmaker depicted perhaps as much as two-thirds of the continent of Africa being subject to Prester John, and according to the inscriptions, a number of the other African monarchs paid tribute to Prester John. One of the newest areas added to the realm of Prester John, according to Mauro, was a “most fertile region” conquered by the “great king of Abassia” somewhere near the year 1430. Mauro located this land between the regions of Mogodisso and Sacara. Mauro identified and had much to say another tribute-paying land that fell under the authority of Prester John; in the following passage he discussed the violent and uncivilized nature of some of these peoples:

Above [that is, south of] the Kingdom of Abbassia there is a very savage and idolatrous people who are separated from Abbassia by a river and by mountains, at the passes of which the kings of Abbassia have built great fortresses so that these peoples cannot pass and do harm to their country. These men are very strong and of great stature and they pay tribute to Prester John, King of Abbassia, and certain thousands of these men serve him to his needs etc.

5 A land that Mauro placed just upriver of Nubia on the Nile.
6 This passage suggests that Mauro may have interviewed some of the Ethiopian dignitaries who traveled to Europe, representing the patriarch and attending the Council of Florence in 1441.
7 Mauro, 10-16.
8 Mauro, 10-F37.
9 Mauro, 09-b35.
10 Evidently the Somalian city of Mogadishu and Saqqara, the necropolis of the Egyptian city of Memphis. The siting of these cities on Mauro’s map, of course, do not correspond well with their actual locations. Falchetta suggested that the Sacara name, which Mauro equated with “manna,” was an important region of sugar production.
11 Mauro, 10-A38.
In addition to the people of “great stature” mentioned above, Mauro described a number of unusual creatures common to medieval European traditions about lands beyond the Mediterranean basin. He noted that “various historiographers write of the source of the Garamantes, which is so hot at night that anyone putting their hand in the water would be scolded; whereas during the day, the water is so cold one cannot stand it.” Mauro also included information from classical writers on “the Panphagi, the Agriophagi, the Antropophagi and the Cinomolgi and their bestial customs.” Finally, Mauro indicated that the lands beyond Mediterranean Africa contained “certain monstrous animals - such as serpents, dragons and basilisks - and give other information I cannot mention here.”

Mauro noted that one of the reasons for the impressive power wielded by Prester John is due to “the numbers of his people, who are almost infinite.” This “almost infinite” population allowed Prester John to field tremendous armies, according to Mauro, and that “when this lord travels with his host of armies, he has with him one million men.” Mauro described the warriors of Prester John as men who “who go naked into battle, except that many of them wear crocodile skin in place of armor.”

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12 The Garamantes were a a Saharan Berber-speaking people who lived in what is now modern-day Lybia. The Romans noted their presence south of what became the province of Africa Proconsularis. For more information about the Garamantes, see McCall, “Herodotus on the Garamantes,” 197-217 and Law, “The Garamantes and Trans-Saharan Enterprise,” 181-200.

13 Mauro, 17-C26.

14 Panphagi: “eaters of everything.”

15 Agriophagi: “eaters of the meat of wild animals.”

16 Probably anthropophagi, “cannibals.”

17 Probably cynamolgi, “dog-milkers.”

18 Probably cynamolgi, “dog-milkers.”

19 Probably cynamolgi, “dog-milkers.”

20 Mauro, 10-g8.

21 Mauro, 10-g8.

22 Mauro, 10-g8.
From his Ethiopian sources Mauro developed a cartographical image of the extent of Prester John’s realm. The persons with whom he claimed to converse indicated that “their territory is more extensive to the south of the sources of the Nile than to the north.” 23 Mauro indicated that his sources claimed that there existed “rivers there that are larger than the Nile, which amongst us is so famous for its size.”24 The source of the Nile fell in the kingdom of Prester John, Mauro noted, and the friar-mapmaker was told that “at the time of their winter, between May and June, due to the great rains, these rivers swell and thus swell the Nile, which rises until it floods Egypt, as is well known.”25

Mauro may have possessed some skepticism on the received knowledge of classical geographers, but he was cautious in any criticisms he might have made about the likes of Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy. He noted that there were “many cosmographers and most learned men who write that in this Africa - and, above all, in the Mauritanias - there are human and animal monsters.”26 While providing his opinion on the monsters and wonders of Africa, Mauro wanted to make sure that readers did not assume that he was trying to “contradict the authority of these men,”27 but because of “the care I have taken in all these years in studying all possible information concerning Africa,” he was reluctant to refute over a thousand years of classical knowledge. Nonetheless, Mauro seemed to have reservations about some of what he read in his studies:

And in all these kingdoms of the negroes I have never found anyone who could give me information on what those men have written. Thus, not knowing anything, I cannot bear witness to anything; and I leave research in the matter to those who are curious about such things.28

23 Mauro, 17-A5.
24 Mauro, 17-A5.
25 Mauro, 17-A5.
27 Mauro, 23-B13.
Prester John as Depicted in the Nuremberg Chronicle (1493)

Hartman Schedel’s Liber Chronicarum, better known to the English-speaking world as the Nuremberg Chronicle, is an illustrated history of the world that serves as a compendium of European knowledge of human civilizations in the late fifteenth century. Not surprisingly, Prester John received a significant amount of attention from Schedel, whose writing reflected his reliance upon the standard literary and geographical works of the period. The illustrator who produced woodcuts for the Chronicle created an image of the legendary Prester John that evoked themes decidedly more religious than secular in describing the mythical priest-king. Below is a scanned image of the woodcut included in Liber Chronicarum:

![Prester John woodcut](image)

The image depicts a seated Prester John performing the sacrament of the Eucharist with kneeling subjects receiving communion wafers. Interestingly, the artist provided Prester John with a halo, making the obvious connection that the legendary priest-king’s piety had elevated him to a status approaching the divine, or at least making him worthy of veneration as a living saint. The setting
of the scene is in a European-style church, and what appears to be a mural behind Prester John and the supplicants contain images of saints, who gaze upon the faithful with approving, beatific looks.

Prester John and Giuliano Dati (ca. 1499)

Italian poet Giuliano Dati, one of the premiere European poets of the late fifteenth century, composed a pair of poems to the mythical priest-king Prester John. The first of these poems was entitled *Treatise on the Supreme Prester John, Pope and Emperor of India and Ethiopia*, while the second poem bore the slightly less magnanimous title of *Second Song of India*. The frontispiece of the published poems depicts Prester John with decidedly European features, and the setting of the priest-king’s court is not unlike those found in Europe at the time.

![Figure 4 - Frontispiece to the poem “The Great Magnificence of Prester John, Lord of Greater India and of Ethiopia,” by Giuliano Dati](image)

29 Rogers, 94.

30 Dati, frontispiece.
The unknown artist who created the frontispiece illustration provided this Prester John with an impressive crown containing jewels in the shape of the *fleur de lis*. Prester John in this image appears to be blessing the supplicants who remain seated before him, and he holds up two fingers in much the same manner as does the Roman Catholic Pope. The image is suggestive of a ruler with both religious and secular authority, certainly in keeping with Prester John’s role as king and patriarch.

The people who surround Prester John in the image also bear similarities to depictions of Europeans in the late fifteenth century. Interestingly, Prester John finds himself holding court over twelve individuals, perhaps an apostolic tip of the cap to Christ. Eleven of the visitors to Prester John's court are bearded and wear cloaks and hats not unlike those of fifteenth century Franciscan prelates, while one person directly to the right of Prester John has decidedly feminine features and is wearing what appears to be a nun’s habit. One is tempted to draw parallels between the symbolism in this image and Leonardo da Vinci’s *L’Ultima Cena*: the timing fits, but there may be additional reasons why this image shares some similarities with the aforementioned Milanese mural of such historical renown. In this illustration to the chapbook’s frontispiece, the artist depicted Prester John’s court above seven steps, each of which contains an admonition to readers to flee (“FVGE”) the seven deadly sins:

![Image of the inscription of the seven deadly sins](Image)

*Figure 5 – Incription of the seven deadly sins, Giuliano Dati*31

31 Each of the cardinal sins is also associated in this illustration with a particular element; for example gluttony (*gulam*) in this woodcut was associated with lead (*plumbo*). 

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*Quidditas 35 (2014) 156*
In keeping with existing beliefs about the exotic lands over which Prester John reigned, the Dati chapbook contains additional woodcut illustrations, and these perpetuated the fabulous elements of the Prester John legend. Not surprisingly, the influence of classical and medieval mythology can be noticed in this image. An example of one such woodcut provided European readers with a visual collection of freakish beings found in Prester John’s lands:

The image contains three figures, including the *Monoculi* (one-eyed beings), *Cynocephali* (dog-headed beings), and a particularly graphic and peculiar image of a sexually dichotomized “Hermofrodite.” All of the mythical creatures bear some form of weaponry, reinforcing the dangerous nature of some of the territories controlled by Prester John. None of the figures wears any clothes, which is certainly in keeping with the exotic sexuality long associated by Europeans with distant lands. Interestingly, the figures of the *monoculus* and *cynocephalus* exhibit an element of modesty as they cover their genitalia in the woodcut, yet the hermaphroditic figure seems to show no such interest in shielding the viewers from
the sexual deviance that awaits those who leave the relatively safe confines of late medieval Europe in search of the lands of Prester John. Still, the presence of monsters and freaks likely served to at least pique the curiosity of European readers, even if they may have served to deter some would-be explorers from venturing overseas.

**Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Indias (1540)**

Lisbon publisher Luís Rodrigues produced in 1540 a one-volume folio of the narrative of the Portuguese missionary Francisco Álvares, who visited Ethiopia in 1540. The text was entitled *Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Indias* ("A True Relation of the Lands of Prester John of the Indies"), although Beckingham and Huntingford observed that only a portion of the *Verdadeira Informação* wound up in this first printing of the writings of Álvares. Born somewhere around the year 1465 in the Portuguese city of Coimbra, Álvares served as a priest in the court of Portuguese king Manuel I. It was during his role in this capacity that Álvares was selected to join a delegation that was sent to the Emperor of Ethiopia, who the Portuguese had equated with Prester John. The group departed from Lisbon in 1515, but they did not actually reach the imperial court until 1520.

The vignette created by the unknown artist on the cover of the folio edition of the *Verdadeira Informação* is decidedly late medieval European in style and content. The artist likely was influenced as much by the traditional beliefs he held regarding the fabled kingdom of Prester John as much as he was by the text itself. The following scanned image of the folio cover offers some clues into the ways in which early sixteenth century Europeans viewed the legendary Prester John:

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32 Beckingham and Huntingford, 13.
The Prester John in this image, not surprisingly, looks as though he would not be out of place in an Iberian royal court. This depiction of Prester John takes on a decidedly military bent, as the legendary priest-king is astride an armored mount and is accompanied by knights, pages, and squires. Prester John and his attendants exhibit distinctly European features: light skin, aquiline noses, and contemporary European hair styles. The clothing and armor worn by Prester John and his followers are typical for Europeans in the late medieval period, and there is considerable use of Christian iconography in the woodcut. One gets the impression that the Prester John imagined by the artist responsible for illustrating Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Indias might
be heading out to face an enemy in the Alentejou or Extremadura, rather than leaving for a battle against the likes of the fearsome beasts such as the *Cynocephali* that purportedly populated the lands of the kingdom of Prester John.

The buildings in (and setting of) the court of Prester John in this depiction also demonstrate a decidedly Iberian influence. There is an interesting blend of Asturian, Romanesque, and Mudéjar styles in this illustration. Of particular interest is the red ceramic barrel-tile roof on buildings in the compound from which Prester John is departing on his armored horse, long a staple of Iberian architecture and one that followed the Spaniards and Portuguese in their colonial endeavors. The walls of the compound appear to be composed of either white brick or white clay plaster, both commonly found in Iberian architecture and in particular buildings influenced by the Mudéjar style. Yet above all the court of Prester John imagined by the artist who created the cover folio for *Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Indias* was one with a primarily military function. The structures contain quite a few accoutrements typical for a late medieval castle: siege towers, arrow slits, curtain walls, and battlements. This Prester John, it seems, was a military-minded sort whose royal court and buildings were built for a war footing.

One might argue that the artist who created the folio illustration was simply influenced by the world in which he lived, and used the nearby buildings, people, and environment for convenient models upon which to base this artwork. Yet to make this argument is to ignore the role of imagination in art: the artist who designed this image believed that Prester John lived in a world much like that of the European monarchs for whom he had at least tangential knowledge. A depiction of Prester John that uses contemporary motifs indicates that the artist believed that the legendary priest-king was more similar to than he was different from his European counterparts. In large measure this was a function of Prester John’s supposedly Christian faith, as it would be unseemly to create an image of a powerful Christian leader (and potential ally against the forces of Islam) who did not possess the expected characteristics of such a ruler.
Gerardus Mercator – 1569

The revolutionary mapmaking techniques employed by sixteenth century Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator need not be retold in their entirety. The genius of Mercator, as one historical geographer described, “lay in designing a chart which at first sight had no novelty other than its elimination of a gross error.” For the purposes of this dissertation, though, Mercator commands considerable interest, for this innovative and influential cartographer steadfastly included the kingdom of Prester John on the maps he produced in the late sixteenth century, a time when – according to the traditional historiography – Europeans had supposedly dismissed the legendary priest-king as a fanciful myth. One author offered the following assessment of Mercator, held in so high esteem by many as exemplary of evidence of the more scientific approaches to geography and cartography:

[H]ere is Mercator, groping for truth, forced to rely on the opinions of such remote men as Juba, Pliny, Ptolemy, Solinus. His more recent authorities are William of Tripoli, a Dominican convert of about 1250; Marco Polo, always called Ven.[etus], 1254-1324; Sir John Mandeville, circa 1332…These it will be observed are none too "recent," even to Mercator’s own times. He must have known of the discoveries made during the time of Prince Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), and later by Vasco da Gama (1469-1524); and such he accepts tacitly. Apparently he knew of no recent explorers to help him about India, China, northern Asia, or the interior of Africa. He gives us a long discussion "about the true location of the Ganges and the Golden Peninsula," trying to distinguish the Ganges from a stream called Guenga; in the end he seems inclined to put the Ganges in what we should call eastern China!

Pictured below is a scanned image of the African continent as Mercator understood it:

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33 Taylor, 202. The problems with previous maps, according to Taylor, included the treatment of north-south rhumb lines as parallel equidistant meridians, and the tradition of plotting coast lines without taking into consideration any compass variations.

34 Hodgman, 128-129.
Though Mercator largely ignored ornamentation and decoration in the production of this 1569 map, the cartographer did see a need to include an image of Prester John in his depiction of Africa. Below is an image of Prester John as conceived by Mercator:

Mercator’s Prester John is depicted by the mapmaker as seated on a royal throne and holding up a cross, symbolizing his dual role as temporal and spiritual leader of his empire. The inscription reads *Prete Giam magnus imperator Abbissini* (“Prester John, great emperor of the Abyssinians”). Interestingly Mercator imagined the
kingdom of Prester John as being centered on the upper Nile River, evoking earlier traditions of the mighty priest-king possessing the power to regulate or shut off the flow of the life-giving Nile.

Though this image of Prester John lacks detail, viewers can easily discern that Mercator imagined the Abyssinian ruler as being European in physical form. The priest-king’s skin was not darkened by the mapmaker, and Prester John wears Renaissance-style clothing, making him look more like Lorenzo de’ Medici than an African, Arabic, or Turkish ruler. More importantly, the fact that Mercator chose to present only one illustrated ruler on the continent of Africa – Prester John – suggests an imagined sense of geopolitical primacy toward the legendary priest-king on the part of the Flemish cartographer.

This importance in maintaining the kingdom of Prester John at the physical and figurative center of Africa was shared by Mercator’s grandson, also named Gerardus Mercator. His 1628 map of Africa included an illustrated depiction of the seemingly ageless Prester John; in this scanned image, one can observe that the passing of almost six decades between grandfather and grandson resulted in few changes to the ways in which Prester John had been imagined by European cartographers:
The 1628 Mercator map again depicts a seated Prester John with a cross, and the mythical potentate still faces east. The priest-king in this image wears a flowing royal robe instead of what appears to be a mandilion on Prester John in the 1569 map. On the head of Prester John is a more elaborate crown in the 1628 image, implying at least a sense of continuity in the perceived importance held by the illustrator toward the priest-king in continental and regional affairs. Both Mercator maps (as well as the range of maps produced by members of the Mercator family and employees of the family business during this period) provided a prominent place for the kingdom of Prester John. While some Europeans in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had begun the process of moving away from a strong belief in the power and wealth of Prester John, clearly the notion of this mighty priest-king remained a source of fascination for many learned Europeans. The Mercator maps serve as evidence of this continued allure. Yet despite his innovative techniques, Mercator and his work remained relatively unknown beyond a small circle of geographical and cartographical experts. It would take the efforts of another Flemish cartographer to bring Mercator’s projections to a wider audience.\textsuperscript{35}

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\textbf{Abissinorum sive Pretiosi Johannis Imperii (1606).}
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The Flemish engraver and cartographer Jodocus Hondius first made a name for himself producing illustrations based on the voyages of Francis Drake. Hondius, however, is better known to modern historians for his 1604 purchase of the copper plates and publishing rights of the Mercator maps.\textsuperscript{36} Hondius did not waste time in bringing the Mercator maps to the burgeoning European map market, and he added a few missing maps to create a collection that offered purchasers an up-to-date view of the world. Below is a scanned image of the map of the kingdom of Prester John in the set:

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35 \textit{Keuning}, 43.
36 \textit{Keuning}, 44.
\end{flushleft}
The map of Prester John’s realm is largely based on the account of Duarte Lopes (1591) and its transcription by Filippo Pigafetta. It is worth noting that Hondius believed that the kingdom of Prester John merited its own page in the atlas, one of the few kingdoms that was so honored.

The map is typical for early-to-mid-seventeenth century maps in its presentation of the kingdom of Prester John. The area reserved to Prester John’s realm is approximately 30 percent of the land mass of the African continent, suggesting the primacy of the legendary priest-king over sub-Saharan Africa. The map’s annotations describe the wealth and power of Prester John, and there is no sense that Hondius does not take at face value the still-prevailing notion that Prester John is an important Christian monarch.

**Nicholas Visscher and Prester John**

The English ecclesiastic Peter Heylyn’s 1652 *Cosmographie* represented yet another attempt by to produce a comprehensive work that described the known world. Heylyn was a fellow and lecturer at Magdalen College, Oxford, and his first foray into geography was
the 1621 *Microcosmus* (“a little description of the great world”).37

A staunch Anglican and Royalist, Heylyn transitioned from the field of divinity in 1647 near the end of the English Civil War. Gilbert notes that Heylyn was able “to settle at Minster Lovell and returned from theology to the study of geography and history, which he had loved in his youth.”38

Heylyn spent the next five years composing the *Cosmographie*, a work that reflected his interest in Ptolemy, Pliny, and the earlier geographical work of George Abbott.39 Gilbert suggests Heylyn was also influenced by the writings of German writer Bartholomäus Keckermann as well as those of French legal scholar Jean Bodin and French poet Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas.40 The *Cosmographie* went through many editions, including a highly regarded sixth edition in 1682, and the work remained a standard geography text into the eighteenth century.41

Among the specialists retained by London publisher Henry Seile to provide maps for Heylyn’s *Cosmographie* was Dutch cartographer Nicolas Visscher. Born in 1618 in Wenna, Austria, Visscher inherited in 1652 the Amsterdam mapmaking business created by his father Claes Janszoon Visscher,42 and the Visscher family developed a reputation as elite cartographers in the Dutch Golden Age.

Yet despite the fact that Visscher possessed the most up-to-date European geographical information - especially given his work with the VOC - Visscher maps of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries reflect a continued reliance upon classical and medieval traditions. This is in decided contrast with the assumptions

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37 Gilbert, 494.
38 Gilbert, 495.
40 Gilbert, 495.
41 Gilbert, 495.
42 Welu, 9.
of some scholars who take for granted a level of modernity that did not necessarily exist among sixteenth and seventeenth century Europeans. Brodsky noted that much like his contemporaries Visscher continued to place value on the Bible as a literal source of geographical information, and that he typically included locations in the modern Levant for the Pentateuchal city of Dan on his maps. Depicted below is the Visscher representation of the continent of Africa, which included the placement of the kingdom of Prester John at the continental center in keeping with the discoveries and embassies of the Portuguese:

![Figure 12 - New, Plaine, & Exact Mapp of Africa (1652), in Heylyn's Cosmographie](image)

Visscher’s map of Africa possesses a fairly accurate depiction of the outlines of the continent, though its sense of

43 Brodsky, 430-440. Dan is mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament, including Genesis 14:14 (“And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan.”) The city is generally considered by biblical scholars to have been northernmost town of the Kingdom of Israel, and previously served as a center for the Tribe of Dan.
scale and proportion are somewhat skewed. Visscher imagined the Sahara Desert to be much smaller than its actual size, and the map contains quite a few imagined mountain ranges and interior bodies of water that bear no similarity to the true topography of the continent of Africa. Interestingly, though, the Tropic of Capricorn, the Tropic of Cancer, and the Equator correspond quite well with their geographical counterparts on modern maps. This suggests an intuitive proposition that distances relatively far removed from African coasts remained largely imagined spaces to Europeans until well into the nineteenth century.

It is the manner in which Visscher depicted the interior of the African continent, however, that is of interest to this study, and the mapmaker’s understanding on the societies and states that inhabited the regions farther removed from the coasts is in contrast should best be described as almost medieval in nature. In many ways the Africa understood by seventeenth century Europeans such as Nicolas Visscher is not incompatible with the beliefs held about Africa by medieval and even classical Europeans. Chief among the European geographical traditions that Visscher included in this map is the presence of a powerful Abyssinian ruler who possessed vast domains in the African continent.

Figure 13 - Prester John as depicted in New, Plaine, & Exact Mapp of Africa (1652)
The figure of Prester John (“King of Abissines”) depicted on Visscher’s map shows evidence of an evolution in European visual representations of the legendary priest-king. The skin color of Prester John is decidedly darker in color than in earlier European representations of the priest-king (though lighter in tone than many contemporary depictions of sub-Saharan Africans), and the facial features of the subject possess characteristics substantially more African than European. Yet Prester John also wears an elaborate European-style crown bedecked with precious stones, implying that the artist believed that this monarch was a king of substantial wealth and power. Moreover, Visscher’s Prester John is arguably more European-like in depiction than any of the other monarchs chosen for the map. The four “African” kings are depicted wearing an array of exotic headgear featuring items such as feathers and horns, while the “King of Morrocca”44 wears an enormous round turban similar to the headpiece worn by the Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. By contrast, the Prester John as depicted by Visscher even has ornamentation similar to the fleur de lis so closely associated with the heraldry of the French.

The spatial positioning of Prester John by Visscher and the geographical depiction of Abyssinia on the map is also worthy of examination. Visscher imagined that Africa contained six kings worthy of mention (“Abissines,” “Conga,” “Guinea,” “Morrocca,” “Madagascar,” and “Mozambique”), and Prester John occupies the top right hand corner of the map. This implies primacy of importance for Prester John, as the depicted African kings are not arranged in any order that reflects geography. In addition, the space allotted to Abyssinia on the map encompasses approximately one-third of the African continent’s total area and perhaps slightly more than half of sub-Saharan Africa.

44 The actual ruler of the regions historically known as “Morrocco” at the time of Heylyn’s Cosmographie was the sultan Moulay Ali Cherif, founder of the Alaouite Dynasty.
It is also within the imagined boundaries of the kingdom of Prester John that Visscher included quite a variety of mythical and legendary items believed by late medieval and early modern Europeans to exist in Africa. Visscher included a “Zair Lake” from which the Congo and Nile Rivers supposedly emanated, which was a body of water that Visscher claimed was “where ye Tritons and Mermaids are said to be.” The southern borders of the land of Prester John are the location of the Mountains of the Moon, also believed by Europeans to be the source of the Nile River; the aforementioned “Zaire Lake” appears to be at the northernmost reaches of this mythical mountain chain. To the east of “Zair Lake” Visscher placed “Fungi Cafates,” a region where “the Amazones are said to inhabit as also in ye kingdoms of Zet and Gavi Cafates.”

Merian Map (1630)

The seventeenth century engraver and mapmaker Matthäus Merian der Ältere – born in Basel and working most of his life in the city of Frankfurt – produced a world map in his 21-volume Topographia, a work that went through many editions and found popularity throughout Europe. Merian was the son-in-law of noted publisher Peter Overstadt, and his work can be considered to be representative of what has become known as the Cologne school of cartography. Below is scanned image of his depiction of the kingdom of Prester John, whose imperial territory in the mind of Merian spanned approximately one-third of the land mass of the African continent:

45 Visscher, in Heylyn, Cosmographie.

46 The idea of the Mountains of the Moon traces its origin back to classical writers such as Diogenes and Ptolemy.

47 Visscher, in Heylyn, Cosmographie. Many of these features also correspond with the 1650 map by Ortelius, suggesting that Visscher was at least acquainted with the earlier map.

48 Meurer, 39.
The boundaries of the kingdom of Prester John as imagined by Merian are somewhat smaller than earlier European maps. This may be indicative of the beginnings of a mid-seventeenth century trend toward a reduction in the size of Prester John’s kingdom as being a function of the gradually decreasing sense of importance that Europeans held toward the legendary priest-king. One might also argue that the concurrent belief in the kingdom of Monomatapa may have also contributed to a perceived reduction in territorial holdings of Prester John. Still, the territory believed to be controlled by Prester John in this map is approximately one-fourth of the land mass of the African continent.

49 The kingdom of Monomotapa (or simply Mutapa) encompassed the regions around the renowned site of Great Zimbabwe. There was an early modern belief among many Europeans that the Monomotapa empire possessed vast goldmines, and this morphed into the idea that the goldmines of Monomotapa were the legendary mines of King Solomon. The region certainly had access to gold, though the dreams of an African Eldorado were unfulfilled, at least if one ignores the nineteenth century Witwatersrand gold strike. For more information on the Mutapa Empire, see Beach, “The Mutapa Dynasty,” 1-17. On European fascination with the goldmining potential of the Mutapa Empire, see Ames, “An African Eldorado?” 91-110.
Yet Marian’s map is indeed highly typical of seventeenth century European maps, which continued to depict central and eastern Africa as the “home” of the kingdom of Prester John. It is not until the late seventeenth century that the legendary priest-king began to disappear from contemporary maps. While some scholars might dismiss the continued presence of Prester John on maps as either rote adherence to traditional forms or as archaic artistic embellishments, the fact that the kingdom of Prester John remained a cartographic staple for so many centuries suggests that – for many Europeans – the legendary priest-king remained an imagined fixture in the Earth’s cosmography.

**Baltazar Tellez**

The Jesuit writer and priest Balthazar Tellez compiled a book on the kingdom of Prester John that was published in Frankfort in 1682. Tellez made extensive use of the histories of Manuel Almeida, Jeronimo Lobo, and Alfonzo Mendez in the production of his *Historia Geral de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia do Preste Ioam*. The text displays the gradual decline in the perceived importance of Prester John in the minds of Europeans, and the priest-king as depicted by the author is not nearly as powerful as earlier textual descriptions.

The writings of Tellez continued to interest Europeans well into the eighteenth century. In 1707 the *Académie Royale des Sciences* disputed the claim by Tellez that the island of Meroe did not exist. While acknowledging that Tellez had “well considered all that the missionaries of his [Jesuit] society have written upon Ethiopia,” the *Académie* was of the opinion that “it is strange that anyone could doubt the existence of the island of Meroe, after what has been noted by the ancients with relation to it.” Among the most important of the ancient writers whose opinions mattered most to the *Académie* with regard to Meroe and Ethiopia was none other than Pliny the Elder.

50 Tellez, 13.
51 *Académie Royale des Sciences*, 134-135.
52 *Académie Royale des Sciences*, 135.
The Prester John imagined by the unnamed artist who designed the frontispiece to *Historia Geral de Ethiopia* retained some of the European features of earlier artistic renditions of Prester John and his kingdom, but the trend in this image is toward a sort of Africanization of the legendary character. Prester John’s skin tone is darker, and many of his subjects wear simple clothing while walking barefoot. The setting of Prester John’s court appears to be rather tropical, with palm trees surrounding the royal throne. Prester John is dressed in clothing that would not be considered typical for a seventeenth century European monarch, and is depicted wearing what appears to be a leopard-skin shawl and light-colored leather boots. Not present in this image, however, are the earlier material signs of opulence and power.

53 *Frontispiece from Baltazar Tellez, Historia Geral de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia do Preste Ioam e do que nella obraram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus: composta na mesma Ethiopia pelo Padre Manoel d’Almeyda, natural de Visev, Provincial e Visitador, que foy na India. Abreviada com nova releçam, e method.*
The artist imagining this scene chose to emphasize the spiritual rather than military powers of Prester John. Approaching the throne are a group of ecclesiastical figures, including one individual who might be characterized as a bishop or archbishop. These might be missionaries, as the depicted scene contains quite a few representations of Christogram IHS, which is incorporated into the seal of the Society of Jesus. Completing the religious theme of the illustration is the inclusion of winged cherubim floating above the throne of Prester John.

The illustrations in *Historia Geral de Ethiopia* are representative of the changing nature of the imagined Prester John. Visual depictions of the legendary priest-king evolved from a late medieval emphasis on the decidedly European nature of Prester John to seventeenth century perceptions of a ruler more African than European. Yet into the eighteenth century this mythical figure continued to fascinate Europeans. Even if the size of his perceived empire began to shrink, Prester John remained a source of inspiration to European minds.

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