

## **The Myth of Prester John and Iberian visions of Ethiopia**

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During a dramatic meeting near Debra Libanos in early 1524, emperor Lebna Dengel and D. Rodrigo de Lima, the first Portuguese ambassador in Ethiopia, discussed the contents of a world map that had been offered by the Portuguese king, D. Manuel I. Looking at the map, the Ethiopian emperor pointed out that Portugal was a very small country, and he advised the ambassador that if the Portuguese sovereign really wanted, as he said, to secure the Red Sea Route from the Turks and to take Mecca and Jerusalem with the help of the Ethiopian Christians, he should ally with the Spanish and the French kings to achieve the necessary military power.

The Portuguese ambassador replied that if Portugal looked small in the map, in comparison with Ethiopia, the reason was that the mapmaker knew very little about this latter country and so he had assigned it a too large territory, almost void of topographical information. The ambassador hurriedly added that Portuguese had indeed the military strength to hold the Red Sea route, but the emperor's silence seemed to relay disbelief and scepticism.

The map was probably similar to quite a few contemporary Portuguese, Spanish, French and Italian maps that extended the upper course of the Nile river very far to the south of the African continent – in some cases, as far down as present Zimbabwe - and consequently immensely exaggerated the size of the Ethiopian territory (see fig. 1).

This episode compounds a series of interesting cultural misunderstandings that were fashioned out of an old game of masks and illusions, in which Europeans and Ethiopians had been immersed for centuries, and that would endure well after the departure of that Embassy from Ethiopian lands. With this embassy something changed radically, though, both for Ethiopians and for Europeans. The book of Father Francisco Álvares, the *True Information about the Lands of Prester John*, that narrates the meeting I just mentioned, and a series of misadventures of that first embassy in Ethiopia<sup>1</sup>, was, according to sixteenth century standards, a best-selling work in Europe. It was published in Lisbon, in 1540, and was rapidly translated into a series of other European languages<sup>2</sup>.

Through it, the De Lima embassy strongly contributed to modify previous European visions of Ethiopia. Of course, the inverse was also most probably true, even if that is not so easy to ascertain (still, the diplomatic literature offer us some clues to Ethiopian ruler's expectations from, and feelings towards, their European counterparts).

In order to present a brief picture of the ideological background that led to the early presence and activities of a group of Jesuit missionaries in this country, from 1555 to 1634, I therefore propose, in this paper, to deal with European preconceived cultural visions of the African and Eastern worlds, and with the transformations they were subjected to, in the course of a century of Iberian contacts with northern Ethiopians.

The manifest intentions of the Portuguese embassy were above all political *and* religious – and not, as the Ethiopian court seems to have interpreted at first, commercial<sup>3</sup>. The embassy, conceived and planned during the last years of D. Manuel's reign, fitted the apocalyptic trend of some circles of the Portuguese court, and was thought of as the materialization of a centuries' old prophetic dream, that had appealed so much to European minds during the Middle Ages: that of a military alliance between a Western king and an Eastern Christian sovereign that would liberate the Holy Land, and would thus inaugurate a Millennium of virtue and social well-being.

As my colleague Isabel Boavida and other Portuguese historians have noted before, there are a few documental signs showing that the early sixteenth century Portuguese travellers in East Africa had (or thought they had) previous indirect knowledge of a similar prophetic stance in Christian Ethiopian political circles.

Such kind of information, apparently coinciding with Emperor Na'od's reign, had reached the East-African port of Quiloa held by the Portuguese: that emperor, who reigned in the last years of the seventh millennium, was – it was said – predestined to destroy Islam. Even though we can't be at all sure that that was a truly Ethiopian prophecy (maybe it was rather, as Isabel Boavida suggests, a Muslim prophetic *adid*)<sup>4</sup>, other sources indicate that there seemed indeed to exist, in Ethiopian literature, references to prophetic ideas about a future alliance between Christian Ethiopians and the *ferenjoch* to destroy Mecca and to liberate the Holy Land. In his book, Father Francisco Álvares actually reports talks with the Bahar Nagash and with the Abuna in which they convey those same ideas. And, in her letter to the Portuguese king, Queen Eleni also mentions that “the time had come” when a European king would vanquish the Muslims and retake Jerusalem.

Many years later, Saint Ignacio of Loyola (the founder of the Company of Jesus – i.e., the Jesuits), wrote a report - an “Information” - to the Portuguese King João III where he offered advise on what kind of priests should be sent to Ethiopia<sup>5</sup>. Here, he made plain that the inclusion of a Patriarch in that mission was essential for the success of the project (I shall go back to this. latter). He then went on counselling the future Catholic Patriarch of Ethiopia on how to gain the trust of the sovereign and the higher lords of the kingdom, and proposing that it would be best to insist on the religious common ground between Westerners and Ethiopians. And, then, he reminded the Portuguese king that “the Ethiopians have a prophecy that says that in these times a Western king (and they are talking about the Portuguese king, it seems) will destroy the Muslims”.

It is impossible to say for sure whether this prophecy was wholly autochthonous or was in some degree brought about by any loose contacts with Muslims or Europeans (and there are few documented instances of them – such as the visit of an Ethiopian delegation to the royal court of Aragon, in the Iberian Peninsula in 1424, and the presence of Ethiopian monks from Jerusalem in Italy, during the Ferrara-Florence ecumenical council, in 1441<sup>6</sup>). Again, Isabel Boavida argues that there was probably a shift in the interpretation the Portuguese made of Ethiopian prophecies, in the sense that it was in European views that the concept of a East-West Christian alliance to retake Jerusalem was intimately associated with millenarian readings of the Apocalypse<sup>7</sup>. But what must also be stressed is that such ideas conform quite well to the overall model laid down with the famous *Letter of Prester John of the Indies*, a forged piece of crusading propaganda from the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>.

To better understand how the rhetorical figure of Prester John appealed to medieval European minds, we must bear in mind that one of the central features of the Western Christian ideas concerning the kingship of divine right was the dialectics of the two bodies of the sovereign as a means to transcend biographical death and political change, as based upon an analogy with the two natures of Jesus Christ<sup>9</sup>. During the Middle Ages and after, that was the frame which supported the cyclical character of the legitimacy structures of royalty in Western Europe. Also, according to Marc Bloch's largely undisputed view, European medieval royalty was, as he put it, only "presque sacerdotal"<sup>10</sup>. By this, he meant that "sacral kingship" is a somewhat inadequate expression to describe a political and ritual institution where not only the attribution of a divine quality to the king would collide with a monotheist faith, but where, also, secular and spiritual functions tended to be accorded to distinct representatives (i.e. a pope and an emperor or king).

We can only find vestigial traces of a political theology concerning actual sovereignty in the notion of the king's two bodies. But it is nevertheless true that medieval theoretical and literary works asserted a more close relationship and identification between an ideal human sovereign (a “king of kings”) endowed with proper priestly functions (i.e., a presbyter) and the kingly figure of the apocalyptic Christ as *Cosmocrator*. That was, in fact, the functional characteristic of the oriental Christian sovereign known as Prester John of the Indies<sup>11</sup>, a fictional character originally produced by the anti-papal circles of the German Emperor’s court – who claimed that the Pope’s spiritual precedence over the Emperor was unacceptable (see fig. 2).

Many of the elements that give form to the strange fiction of Prester John, in the *Letter*, derive directly from biblical tradition. Namely, the description of his palace, of the source of eternal life and the tree of life, as well as the ethical qualities of his subjects; all are clearly inspired by the last chapters of Saint John’s *Apocalypse*. These borrowings help underline the very peculiar capability attributed to the Eastern sovereign to establish an unmediated communication with the higher spheres of Heaven, from where he received his super-human authority. With the help of the patriarch of Saint Thomas, he ruled, both in spiritual and secular terms, over a perfect, wonderful society. The civil and ethical perfection of the Indians, and Prester John's own Christ-mimesis, are symbolized in the presence of a very special bird in the kingdom: the unique and eternally reborn phoenix.

Prester John, as the utopian-like description of his Indian kingdom in the early medieval Latin letters clearly show, was a very potent image of a Christ-mimetic priestly king, intimately connected with the concept, common in Western European medieval traditions, of the "king of the last days" or *Endkaiser*, who would, in alliance with a western sovereign, emerge from the Orient to conquer the Holy Land and free Jerusalem from Muslim hands - this pious act would be a prophetic sign of the end of the world and, simultaneously, of its apocalyptic renewal, with the coming of the New Heavenly Jerusalem<sup>12</sup>. A temporal ruler, he was also a minor priest, a "presbyter" in a religious hierarchy headed by the patriarch of St. Thomas. This Christian utopia was itself inspired in the Syriac Christian traditions that attributed the conversion of an Indian king and his family to the missionary zeal of St. Thomas Didymus, who offered the king a palace in Heaven<sup>13</sup>. In the course of five centuries and up to the seventeenth, we can witness the transformation and eventual eclipse of the Christ-mimetic character of the Indian priestly king reigning over a perfect society. (Even if in iconographic terms we can sometimes find surprising

survivals, as in the 16<sup>th</sup> century French *Atlas Vallard*; see fig. 3).

This transformation derived, not only from an overall alteration of the limits of linear time (i.e., from its re-structuring, since the end of the world hadn't happened and the End Kaiser hadn't liberated Jerusalem), but from specific historical circumstances like the Mongol invasions of Muslim and European countries and the European world travels and expansions. The gradual dissolution of the Christ-mimetic character of Prester John, and the abandoning of the millenarian theme of the end of the times, coincided with a new location for his kingdom, proposed in late medieval travellers' and cosmographers' accounts – specially from Italy and the Iberian Peninsula. The acceptance of an identity between the Prester John of the *Letter* and the actual Christian (but not Catholic) ruler of the Ethiopian kingdom meant that he was now spatially and conceptually separated from the Christian Indian followers of Saint Thomas<sup>14</sup>, and that he was progressively seen as an heretical African king ruling over heretical black people (see figs. 4 and 5).

This change in Prester John's characterization - becoming African, he was consequently conceived as a cursed descendant of the biblical Kush -, came to imply, in seventeenth century Jesuit literature, a suggestive tint of an evil character of the imperial Ethiopian figure. This change still depended upon particular cosmographical co-ordinates: a mitigated Christ-mimesis was initially allowed in this Eastern African region, by the underlining, both in maps and in travel accounts, of its proximity to the sources of the Nile (one of the four rivers that were supposed to flow from Eden) [hence the insistence in the search for its sources], its oriental and mountainous location (near the Mountains of the Moon, one of the hypothetical emplacements of the Earthly Paradise<sup>15</sup>), and the ancient characterization of Ethiopia as the "third India".

To understand the grievous categorical consequences this displacement had on the Western cosmographical framework, we must keep in mind that, in medieval thought, geographical space was made intelligible through a system of religious, ethical, cosmic and elemental co-ordinates. As can be seen in medieval ecumenical maps, with the East at the top and West at the bottom, the *ecumena* was conceived in a more or less strict analogy with the body of Christ - the head, in the extreme East, was where the earthly Paradise was located and was nearer the celestial sphere; Jerusalem was the navel of the world; the feet, in the West, were its lowest part. In this system, where moving westward signified to go down and to degenerate, and to go East was to ascend physically and ethically, North and South also had analogical significance, in terms of the right and left sides of Christ's body. Whereas the colder northern regions were thought to be populated with

long living and temperate people, the more one travelled to the South, in the direction of the Torrid Zone, the more degenerate, dissolute and eventually monstrous humanity was thought to be. The western part of Africa was seen as a land that harboured a cursed, degenerate population; the eastern part, and specially the Horn of Africa, was seen as both an highland and a higher land.

The ideological context of the Iberian discoveries was highly ecumenical. To "discover" (i.e., to "uncover") the world was to cast the light of true faith upon the darkness of ignorance and evil that subjected non-Christian humanity<sup>16</sup>. In the Portuguese case, travel around African coasts was also conceptualised within a crusading project which meant to a large extent the penetration of the continent through its water courses<sup>17</sup>; these were thought to be connected, in some unknown ways, to the sources of the Nile (through a central African lake), and consequently to Prester John's Christian kingdom - the West African rulers were often treated as his vassals. At the same time, envoys of the Portuguese king were being sent by land to East Africa, with letters to the "Prester John of the Indies".

The idea that had come down from the medieval Letter, of an alliance between Prester John and a Western sovereign (the Portuguese kings saw themselves in that position), was to be kept alive in Portuguese strategic military writings and in the diplomatic correspondence: the conquest of the Holy Land, and the destruction of the Muslim world were frequently suggested or proposed in the documentation<sup>18</sup>. But on the other hand, when the Ethiopian ruler was publicly and officially contacted in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the discrepancies between the perceived Ethiopian reality and the magnificent kingdom described in the Letter began being highlighted by Portuguese writers. In fact, reality seemed to have played a terrible trick on their expectations: how could, they wondered, a black king, living permanently in a tent and ruling over a poor, barbarous and schismatic people in a mountainous wilderness, be the magnificent Prester John?

Hereticism, poverty, evil ways and uncivilised, improper customs, as well as Jewish and Arabic influences were to be held as proofs of the inadequacy of the prior identification between the self-styled author of the medieval *Letter* and this African king. This inadequacy became more manifest in 1541, when an ironical inversion of expectations took place: instead of help the Portuguese had hoped for from their allied "Prester John" to achieve the control of the Red Sea, they were asked to send a small expeditionary force to rescue young Galawdevos' weak army from certain defeat at the hands of the Adali invaders (in 1541-1543).

Just a few years later, in 1555, the first Jesuit missionaries landed in Ethiopia; The initial prospect of converting the Monophysite Christians and their emperor, that the Portuguese, like most Europeans, still insisted in calling Prester John<sup>19</sup> had to wait for better days, since they were confined to offer spiritual comfort to the Portuguese that had remained in the country<sup>20</sup>. It was only in 1603, with the arrival of a second mission in a much-changed political setting, that the Loyola programme was activated.

In the writings of these latter Jesuit missionaries, for whom the conversion of the Ethiopian ruler and the search for the sources of the Nile were two interrelated goals, it is clear that the Ethiopian reality posed a difficult conceptual problem: like other travellers before them, they retained the designation of "Prester John" as the valid title of the Ethiopian king; they confronted Ethiopian social and physical reality having the medieval *Letter* in their minds (even if only to deny it), and were eager to convert Ethiopia to Catholicism so it would conform to (a revised interpretation of) the utopian model: a (Catholic) virtuous king of kings that sat on a throne, tutored by a (Catholic) Patriarch, and living in a (western style) palace.

Partly Christian but heretical, African but in some important ways Asiatic (with Semitic kingship structures, with Semitic language and writing systems), degenerate but visibly "civilized" since the Aksumite period, Ethiopia was in the end – after their expulsion - to be declared a true monstrosity, by the surviving Jesuit writers<sup>21</sup>.

Pedro Páez and his companions seemed to have modelled their political action upon the account of the conversion of the Indian king by St. Thomas, as well as by the papal perspective of spiritual supremacy over emperors and kings. For them, to establish a Catholic Patriarchy in Ethiopia was to abide to Ignacio de Loyola's plan – and this meant, in some way, to re-enact the legendary relation between the patriarch of St. Thomas and Prester John (see fig. 6).

The Jesuits seemed to conceive that to occupy the position of the *abuna*, the Egyptian Coptic patriarch, meant that they could rule over the Ethiopian emperor, as they were the representatives of the Catholic Pope. They may have failed to understand the particular institutional relation between the Emperor and the Coptic patriarch they thought they were replacing. The specific act of imposing the submission of the Ethiopian ruler Susīnyos to the Catholic pope, which took place in Dīnqaz in 1626, seems to have been the dramatic turning point that reversed the course of the emperor's political action, and the beginning of the systematic disempowerment and persecution of the Jesuits

and the group of Catholic converts<sup>22</sup>.

In fact, submission of the emperor to the *abuna* (or for that matter to the Jesuit patriarch) was a concept strange to Ethiopian Christian ideology. The *abuna* was a foreigner, a representative of the Alexandrian Coptic church, who had no real hierarchical supremacy over the Ethiopian Christianity or over the *Negusa Nagast* that ruled over Christians, Jews, Muslim, and pagan people alike. So, in the Ethiopian perspective, there was little reason to see the emperor, who claimed to be a descendant of Menelik, the elder son of Solomon, submit to a representative of the Westerners, the descendants of Adrami, second son of Solomon, according to the *Kebrä Nagast*<sup>23</sup>.

Fasilidas, Susinyos' son, aimed at appeasing the great social tensions within the kingdom, and to achieve this he opted to sacrifice the Catholic minority. By restoring orthodoxy, he was acting with the intention of repairing the damage caused by his father's political options; He may also have promoted the obliteration of any written memory concerning the influence of the Jesuits in the royal court<sup>24</sup>.

The tentative identification between that fictional sovereign and the Ethiopian ruler became actively denied in their writings as a discursive reflection of the violent disempowerment they suffered, from 1631 until their final expulsion, when they finally declared the symbolic and historical death of Prester John<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *True Information about the Lands of Prester John*, Lisbon, 1540, chapter CXV. There is an Amharic translation by Girma Beshah, published in Lisbon, in 1966: *Ityopya Portugezoch Ĕndiyuut*.

<sup>2</sup> António Banha de Andrade, "Francisco Álvares e o êxito europeu da verdadeira informação sobre a Etiópia", in: *Colóquio sobre a Presença de Portugal no Mundo*, Lisboa, JICU-CECA, Separata CXLV, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Also, there is reason to think that some of the conflicts that arose within the Portuguese embassy (the clashes between the Rodrigo de Lima's and Jorge de Abreu's factions) might have something to do with the major dissention between the "millenarists" and the "merchants" in India (see *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*, by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Isabel Boavida, *Etópia e Portugal no Século XVI: Encontros e Equívocos*, (waiting publication), chap. II.

<sup>5</sup> In C. Beccari, *Notizia e Saggi di Opere e Documenti Inediti Riguardanti la Storia di Etiopia Durante i Secoli XVI, XVII e XVIII*, Roma, Casa Editrice Italiana, 1903, pp. 240-1.

<sup>6</sup> On the questioning of the Ethiopian monks at the Ferrara-Florence Council, aragon, see Biondo Flavio, *Historiarum ab inclinatione Romanorum quartae decadis liber secundus* (1442), XXXVII-XLVII, in Bartolomeo Nogara, *Scritti inediti e rari di Biondo Flavio*, Roma, Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1927, pp.23-7.

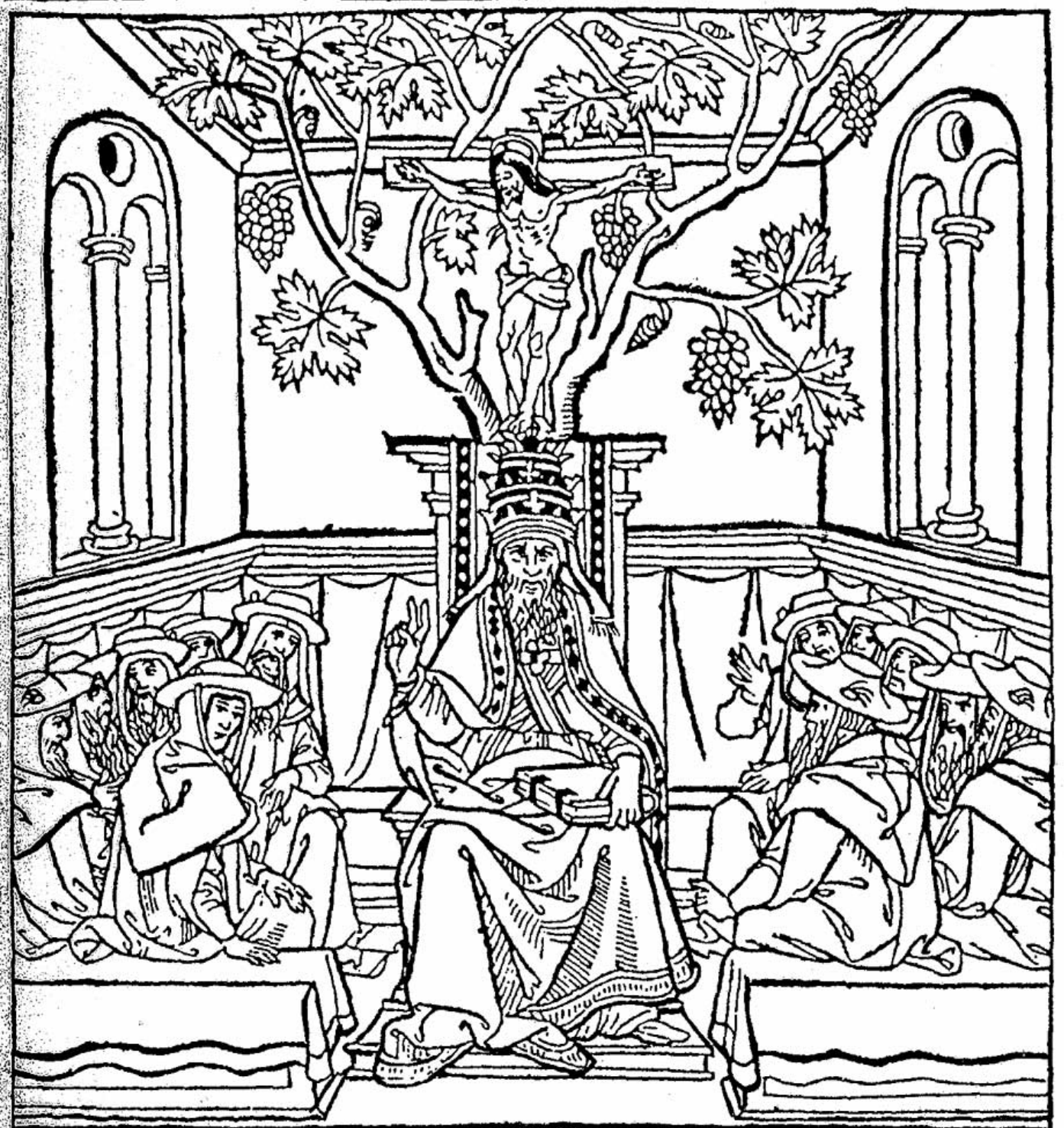
<sup>7</sup> Isabel Boavida, *Etópia e Portugal* ??? vol. I (unpublished MsC dissertation), Lisbon, Faculdade de Letras-Universidade de Lisboa, 2004.

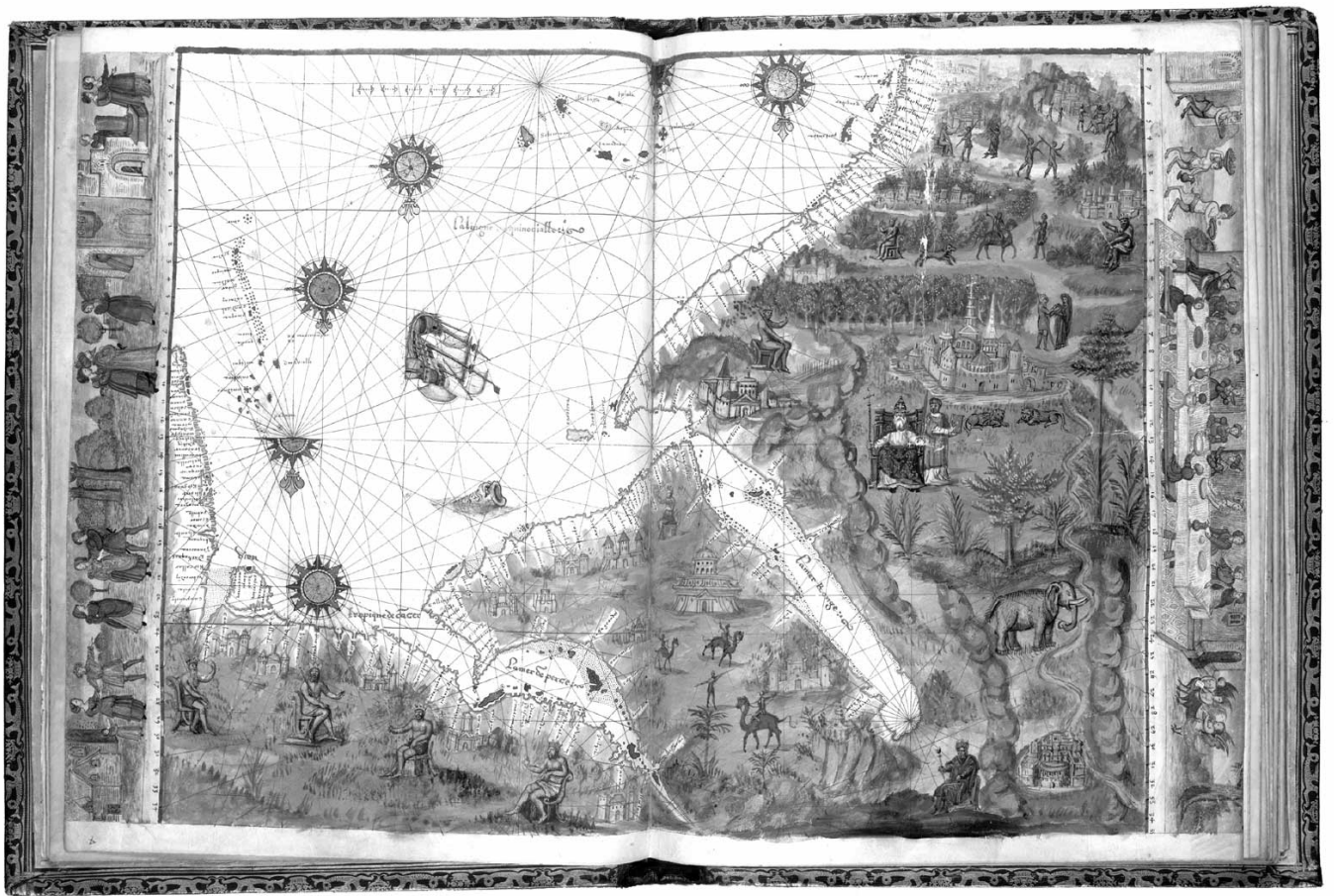
<sup>8</sup> See István Bejczy, *La lettre du Prêtre Jean: une utopie médiévale*, Paris, Imago, 2001; Manuel João Ramos, *Ensaio de Mitologia Cristã: O Preste João e a Reversibilidade Simbólica*, Lisboa, Assírio & Alvim, 1997.



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- <sup>9</sup> Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957, chapters III and VII.
- <sup>10</sup> Marc Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges. Étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983, p.186.
- <sup>11</sup> Ramos, *Ensaio*..., pp. 100-2; see also Jean-Pierre Albert, "Le roi et les merveilles: à propos de la légende du Prêtre Jean", in: *Cahiers de Littérature Orale*, XXIX, 1991, pp. 17-45.
- <sup>12</sup> Martin Gosman, "Otton de Freising et le Prêtre Jean", *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, LXI, 1983, pp.270-284.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Acts of Thomas*, ed. A.F.J. Klijn, Leiden, 1962, act II, chap. 18-25; Ramos, *Ensaio*..., pp. 211.
- <sup>14</sup> See the accounts of travellers such as Pero Tafur and Niccolò de' Conti (in: M. Longhena, *Viaggi in Persia, India e Giava di Nicolò de' Conti, Girolamo Adorno e Girolamo di Santo Stefano*, Milano, 1929), and Jourdan Catalan of Severac, (*Mirabilia Descripta*, ed. H. Yule, London, Hakluyt Society, 1863), that confirm Marco Polo's distinction between a Mongol and an Ethiopian christian ruler.
- <sup>15</sup> It was specially in Iberian Dominican visions that the mountain retreat of Amba Geshem, in central Ethiopia, came to be more visibly identified with an African earthly Paradise (see Luis Urreta's *Historia eclesiastica, politica, natural y moral de los grandes y remotos Reynos de la Etiopia, Monarchia del Emperador llamado Preste Juan de las Indias*, Valencia, 1610).
- <sup>16</sup> José Barradas de Carvalho, *À la recherche de la spécificité de la renaissance portugaise*, Paris, vol. II, pp. 529; William Randles, "Sur l'idée de découverte". In: Michèle Mollat & Pierre Adad (eds.) *Aspects internationaux de la découverte océanique aux XVe. et XVIe. siècle, Travaux du Cinquième colloque International d'Histoire maritime, Lisbonne 14-16 Sept.*, Paris, S.E.V.P.E.N., 1966, pp. 20 ff.
- <sup>17</sup> Randles, "Notes on the Genesis of the Discoveries", *Studia*, V, 1960, pp. 20-27.
- <sup>18</sup> See specially the Afonso de Albuquerque's *Comentários*, Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda, 1973 (facsimile edition), vol. 2, part IV, chap. XLVIII, p. 244.
- <sup>19</sup> Ramos, *Ensaio*..., pp. 171 ff.
- <sup>20</sup> Hervé Pennec, *Des jésuites au royaume du Prêtre Jean*, Paris, Centre Culturel Gulbenkian, 2003 pp. 15, 88.
- <sup>21</sup> See the prologue of the SOAS manuscript of Manuel de Almeida's *Historia de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia* (in C.F. Bekingham and G.W.B. Huntingford (eds.) *Some Records of Ethiopia*, London, The Hakluyt Society, 1954, p. XXXIV; see also Jerónimo Lobo, *Itinerário e outros escritos inéditos* (ed. M. Gonçalves da Costa), Porto, Civilização, 1971, pp. 786-7.
- <sup>22</sup> H. Pennec, *Des jésuites au royaume*..., pp. 230 ff.; Merid Weolde Aregay, "The Legacy of Jesuit Missionary Activities in Ethiopia from 1555 to 1632", in Getatchew Haile, Aasuly Lande and Samuel Rubenson (eds.) *The Missionary Factor in Ethiopia: Papers from a Symposium on the Impact of European Missions on Ethiopian Society*, Lund University, August 1996, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1998, pp.53-5.
- <sup>23</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and her only son Menyelek I*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1931, chap. 72, pp. 121-4.
- <sup>24</sup> On the rewriting of the *Chronicle of Susēnyos* after the emperor's death, see H. Pennec, *Des jésuites au royaume*..., pp. 287 ff.
- <sup>25</sup> Jerónimo Lobo, *Itinerário*..., pp.786-789.









En unrey danubia lo qual  
 met Anguera ab los  
 vrbia lo qualz son setz messos  
 en diez indies

