

# Prisoners of Prester John

The Portuguese Mission to Ethiopia in  
Search of the Mythical King, 1520–1526



Cates Baldridge

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To Susan,  
for sharing the journey

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Any scholar who seeks to understand Portugal and Ethiopia's first signifi-

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## Preface

This book's subject is the sixteenth-century journey of a small band of Portuguese into the kingdom of Ethiopia, their six years of captivity in that land, their eventual escape, and the large implications of their strange odyssey for both nations. In attempting to tell this story, however, I immediately confronted a difficulty concerning what to call the high-minded yet misbegotten enterprise the Iberians believed they were undertaking as they waded ashore in Abyssinia that spring of 1520. Given the minuscule number of Portuguese who had previously set foot in that quarter of Africa, the term "expedition" seems entirely justified, especially since the Europeans' inward tramp featured all the hardships and dangers usually associated with pursuits meriting that name. On the other hand, expeditions are not usually headed by someone calling himself (and recognized by his government as being) an ambassador, and do not often intend to exchange formal letters of understanding with whatever indigenous leaders they encounter. Because the company of Portuguese who arrived on the Abyssinian coast were led by just such a person who intended to do just that, I have decided that "embassy" is probably the more correct label to employ. And yet, the yawning chasm between what they wishfully expected to find and what actually awaited them in the Ethiopian interior made them reel again and again from the brute shock of discovery. There is simply no ready-made term to describe their errand into the unknown.

Certainly their mission's larger outlines bear little resemblance to our current master-narrative concerning first encounters between Europeans and Africans elsewhere during the early-modern period. Indeed, it differs quite markedly from that familiar tragedy wherein white men's racist assumptions about black Africans are formed before anchor is weighed, quickly self-confirmed once landfall is attained, and then violently enacted soon after stockades are erected. Because Ethiopia was the last nation on earth that might still plausibly house the legendary kingdom of Prester John — its status as a militantly Christian country lying beyond the Islamic heartland making it superficially



resemble that apocryphal realm — the Portuguese who eagerly risked their lives to reach it were half-expecting to encounter a civilization in some respects superior to their own, and were thus willing to count the Abyssinians as honorary Caucasians. And while this rare and fragile inter-racial *entente* was quickly strained and degraded once the exoticism of the Ethiopian Empire was discovered to be quite peculiarly its own rather than that specified in long-standing European fantasies, it never reverted to the exploitative and dehumanizing assumptions that prevailed elsewhere on that colonized continent. Even when, decades later, the tragedy finally arrived, it resembled the variety that Europeans tended to inflict upon one another rather than on peoples they considered their racial inferiors. While every collision between African and European cultures possesses its own unique aspects, Ethiopia and Portugal's romance of genuine idealism and stubborn misprision nevertheless remains unmistakably *sui generis*.

At the center of this exceptional story resides the equally exceptional person who left us an account of it all — Francisco Álvares, the sole priest assigned to the Portuguese mission — and it is one of my intentions to rescue him from a disservice he has suffered at the hands of previous historians. Though nearly everyone who has written on the subject of Portugal's final attempt to track down Prester John has confessed to finding Álvares attractive for his curiosity, level-headedness, and accuracy, still none has quite granted him his intellectual, imaginative, and emotional due. Pointing to the notable lack in his account of any admission that the Ethiopians practiced a mono-physite version of Christianity that his superiors in Rome would (and eventually did) denounce as damnably heretical, commentators have blithely concluded that the finer points of Christology were simply beyond him. In my view, however, this is not a plausible explanation for our priest's silence on the issue. Given who he was, the office entrusted to him, where he had traveled previously, and who he befriended in Ethiopia, he surely must have come soon enough — if reluctantly and fearfully — to a full knowledge of his hosts' religious opinions. Rather than see him as oblivious to the situation, I am convinced that, in an act motivated by his oft-professed admiration for the Ethiopians and a new-found tolerance for variant Christianities engendered by his encounter with their exuberant spirituality, he deliberately withheld his knowledge of the Abyssinians' true beliefs from his ecclesiastical superiors. Furthermore, I believe he committed this act of creative dereliction precisely in order to spare the Ethiopians the onslaught of "corrective" evangelization that was in fact imposed upon them in the century after he left. Needless to say, such a reading of mono-physitism's absence from his chronicle makes Álvares into a much more assertive, canny, and transgressive figure than he has hitherto been recognized as being. He still emerges from the pages of his chronicle as an attractive man — indeed, if I am correct, there are more reasons for modern readers to think him so than have yet been acknowledged.

I suppose that when one has what Joseph Conrad calls “a ripping good yarn” to relate, it is a temptation to overestimate the influence of individual personalities upon the currents of history. And yet, after giving due weight to geo-political trends of *longue durée* and the deep assumptions of incommensurate ideologies, the palpable effects of Álvares’ character remain unmistakable. While his fellow Portuguese were managing first to offend and then spectacularly scandalize the Ethiopian elites, our priest succeeded in the face of obstacles that were cultural, religious, generational, and logistical to forge a genuine friendship with Lebna Dengel, the Ethiopian king, or *Negus*. And when, some time later, that king asked his new friend to gratify a fleeting royal whim, the great gears of national destiny were suddenly set to spinning with consequences visible unto the present day. As I hope to demonstrate, had Francisco Álvares been a different kind of man, Christian Ethiopia would have ceased to exist within a quarter-century of the Portuguese arrival. The happy fact of the matter is, the more scrupulously one attends to Álvares’ narrative, the more his story acquires the energies and contours of popular literary genres. After all, his chronicle is, in a manner of speaking, a love story — though one involving *caritas* rather than *eros*, since Álvares managed to lose his heart not to an individual, but to an entire people. Subsequently, when he came to the agonizing realization that he must decide between either protecting the culture he had come to love or fulfilling his sworn duty, he chose the former, which makes his story one of intrigue and deception as well. And finally, for all involved it was a drama of suspense, since their homeward journey took a decade of struggle to complete, and often threatened to become a lifelong exile.

While this book’s primary focus is the six years that Álvares and his companions spent within Ethiopia — as ambassadors, explorers, and prisoners — I could only tell the full story by occasionally broadening the scope of my narrative to times and places beyond the Abyssinia of 1520–26. Consequently, my first three chapters attempt briefly to sketch the history of the Prester John myth and the many endeavors it spawned, as well as to recall why, among European nations, it was Portugal that found itself poised to investigate the last, best geographical candidate for that elusive monarch’s homeland. In these early pages I also attempt to outline Ethiopia’s fitful but long-standing efforts to reach out to her European co-religionists. Then, as the book nears its end, I twice digress from the main story (in parts of chapters ten and eleven) to survey the consequences engendered by the embassy’s release from captivity, an emancipation for which Álvares was mainly responsible. The first of these concerns the dramatic rescue mission mounted by the Portuguese in the 1540s as Abyssinia teetered on the brink of destruction at the hands of Muslim jihadists. The second covers the subsequent invasion of that land by the equally determined foot-soldiers of the Jesuit order, a fate that Álvares in some measure foresaw and feared, but which his principled silence was ultimately unable to prevent.

In recounting the main trunk of the story I rely heavily on Álvares' surviving chronicle of his experiences, though not, I hope, in an uncritical spirit. Previous commentators have pronounced him to be largely reliable about the facts, and I have found no reason to disagree with them. Still, in attempting to parse his account as closely as I was obliged to, I unsurprisingly found many instances when his observations were shaped by either tactical concerns of the day or strategic designs entertained for the future. He is the best window we have on what happened, but he is fallible, and by the time he left Ethiopia he possessed a daring agenda, all of which colors his writings. One thing Álvares was not particularly good at was describing with clarity and accuracy the natural and architectural wonders of Abyssinia, and so it is on such occasions that I have found myself obliged to supplement his observations most heavily with my own. Luckily, I was able to retrace the steps of the Portuguese company during a trip to Ethiopia in 2008, where I found a remarkable amount of what Álvares described persisting essentially intact. If I am able to convey to my readers even a partial sense of what an exquisite storehouse of cultural wonders Ethiopia remains today, then another aim of this book will have been fulfilled.

In representing Portugal and Ethiopia's critical first encounter with each other and the central role that Álvares played in that tragicomic affair, I have had — as anyone must — to occasionally speculate about certain historical actors' states of mind. And there is no sidestepping the fact that my largest claim about Álvares involves just such an extrapolation, though one that I believe is more than justified by the textual evidence at hand. As I hope will become clear, some of the new facts I unearth from Álvares' account are hiding in plain sight, while others lurk discreetly between the lines. Furthermore, I fully realize that my insistence on reading a puzzling absence as the marker of a desperately purposeful intention will need to clear a higher hurdle of skepticism than many another assertion. I can only say that what convinced me was the mental and emotional caliber of Álvares' voice as expressed on nearly every page of his chronicle — a voice my readers must weigh and decide about for themselves. If in what follows I succeed in raising his testimony even a little way above the cloud of obscurity and misunderstanding in which it has too long languished, that will be enough for me.

## A Note on the Text

Amharic employs a script as different from Roman orthography as Hebrew or Arabic, and thus the rendering of any particular Amharic term into a phonetic English equivalent is at best an inexact art, though the regularization of this process has steadily advanced in recent years. In general, my procedure has been as follows. When a term appears in the Hakluyt translation of Álvares whose phonetic expression is so close to that of the spelling preferred by modern scholars that readers are likely to instantly match one with the other, I have kept the original spelling within direct quotations from the translated edition while giving the modern equivalent in my own discussions of the same person, place or thing. Thus, for instance, when the subject is the Ethiopian Governor of the Seacoast, his title appears as the "Barnagais" when Álvares refers to him and as the "*Bahr-nagas*" when I do. I have followed this practice because to my mind it renders vividly the texture both of the Europeans' incomplete understanding of what they were encountering, and of Álvares' anxious attempt to get things down as accurately as he could. When a term in Álvares' translation roams too far from this standard, I have had recourse to bracketing; well-known places from the Bible or European and African geography I have rendered in their familiar forms.



## ONE

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### News from Nowhere

The first report that there might be a powerful Christian king reigning far to the east, beyond the lands of the Muslim enemy, came to the ears of medieval Europe in the winter of 1145. It was welcome news, for the Christian possessions in the Holy Land, won a half-century before during the First Crusade, were now under threat. The city of Edessa had just fallen to an Islamic re-conquest, and fear was rife that the rest of the small and vulnerable Crusader states — Antioch, Tripoli, and especially Jerusalem — would be the next to have its churches looted and converted into mosques. The menaced Christian kings of the near east had accordingly sent Hugh, Bishop of the Syrian city of Jabala, to Italy in order to beg Pope Eugene III for aid. His appeal was urgent, and the pontiff would soon respond by calling on the European heartland to mount a Second Crusade, but amid his alarming account Hugh also managed to convey the hopeful story of a Christian victory, though one that took place far away in lands whose geography and inhabitants were almost entirely unknown to Europeans. As a witness described it, the bishop “related also that not many years before a certain John, a king and priest who dwells beyond Persia and Armenia in the uttermost East and, with all his people, is a Christian but a Nestorian [heretic], made war on the brother-kings of Persians and Medes, ... and stormed Exbatana, the seat of their kingdom.” From this battle, which lasted three full days since “both parties were willing to die rather than turn in flight,” the monarch named “Prester John, for so they are accustomed to call him, pu[t] the Persians to flight with dreadful carnage” and “finally emerged victorious.”<sup>1</sup> This is the first written document in which the name Prester John — literally, John the Presbyter, or Priest — appears, though it would soon become a powerful charm that would both evoke outsized hopes and instigate many doomed endeavors. Indeed, over the next four centuries Europeans would write so many words, spend so much money, and dedicate so many of their lives to finding him, that they would transform him into the most important imaginary figure in Western history.

It is probable that Bishop Hugh's narrative was a distorted account of an actual battle in which his Muslim foes fared badly, for we know that on September 9, 1141, the army of the Seljuk Turks was dealt a thoroughgoing defeat near the central Asian city of Samarqand. The Seljuk Empire, which was Muslim in religion and Persian in culture, was a vast realm that sprawled from the Dardanelles to the Aral Sea, so while on their western frontier they battled European crusaders with names such as Robert of Normandy and Baldwin of Boulogne, on their eastern flank they faced a much different opponent. Their vanquisher there in 1141 was the so-called Black Cathay empire, a culture with Chinese roots centered north of Afghanistan's Hindu Kush mountains. Of course what mattered most immediately to Hugh or to any European who heard tell of this distant rout was the setback incurred by the Mohammedan Seljuks, who were then within striking distance not only of the Crusader states but of Constantinople as well. From such distant tidings, a combination of ignorance and wishful thinking quickly painted these eastern victors as followers of Christ rather than, as in fact they were, disciples of the Buddha.

After relating his fractured version of the battle, Hugh went on to reveal details of Prester John's supposed intentions toward his western co-religionists: "After this victory the aforesaid John moved his army to the aid of the Church in Jerusalem, but ... when he had reached the river Tigris ... [he] was unable to transport his army across ... by any device." Undaunted, "he turned towards the north, where, he had learned, this stream was frozen over on account of the winter's cold. When he had tarried there for several years without, however, seeing his heart's desire realized (the continued mild weather prevented it), and lost many of his soldiers because of the unfamiliar climate[,] he was forced to return home."<sup>2</sup> Since in all probability Bishop Hugh was merely passing on a story that had somehow arisen out of, and gained currency by feeding upon, the collective anxiety of the threatened Crusaders, it is worth noting how well crafted it is to accomplish their strategic ends. By positing the existence of a sympathetic Christian monarch aching to come to the rescue of his fellow Christians in the Holy Land, the Crusader cause is prevented from appearing hopeless. On the other hand, by telling of his frustrating inability to cross the Tigris, no room is left for complacency — his arrival is not imminent, and thus Jerusalem and the rest of the Latin Kingdoms must be re-supplied and their garrisons reinforced if they are to hold out until he undertakes another rescue mission.<sup>3</sup> Of course this last is accomplished only at the cost of making him appear a bit feckless, but the choice of the Tigris as John's unlikely hindrance seems devised by an unconsciously canny calibration: every educated European knew that it was a real river, that it was at most 30 hard days march east of Jerusalem, and that Alexander the Great had crossed it and pressed on to realms more distant still. Thus if the Prester was not within Europe's grasp today, he nevertheless resided within tomorrow's imagined reach; with courage and luck

and the right map, one might be able to find him and show him the way west. In the coming decades he would maintain just such a tantalizing position vis-à-vis an ever-widening set of European aspirations: close enough to inspire visions of decisive victory, yet apparently just too far away to arrive at the hour of need.

In addition to these military dispatches, Bishop Hugh delivered another tantalizing piece of news about this king. In medieval times, a ruler's bloodline was as important a credential for leadership as any claim to strength or cunning, and the Prester apparently possessed an exalted one, for "it is said that he is a lineal descendant of the Magi."<sup>4</sup> Since their original appearance in the New Testament's various accounts of Jesus' birth, the Magi had subsequently undergone an imaginative transformation. In Matthew and Luke, the three wise men appear to be no more than Persian astrologers, but because the Old Testament books of Isaiah and the Psalms speak of foreign kings paying homage to the Messiah, by as early as the sixth century both popular and learned Christian traditions had promoted the Magi to the status of kings.<sup>5</sup> If the trio had therefore, by Hugh's time, become an amalgam of political power, arcane wisdom, religious devotion, and mysterious eastern provenance, then insisting that the Prester sprang from such loins not only began to explain his current whereabouts, but associated him at one swoop with Christianity, kingship, and magic. Thus those elements that often mixed uneasily in a feudal Europe still struggling to determine the proper relationship between secular and churchly authority, and straining to reconcile ingrained folkways with official religious doctrine, were benignly blended in this ruler from beyond the heathens' deserts. For if he was simultaneously warrior, priest, and wizard, and if, in being such, he united rather than divided his subjects and made them into a mighty nation that caused the infidels to tremble, then he was ready-made to function as a collective fantasy of cultural harmony. The fourth-century Roman emperor Constantine had seemed to promise the reconciliation of crown and cross when he harkened to his vision of "*in hoc signo vinces*" and led his legions to victory under the banner of Christ. Since then, however, king and pope had struggled fiercely with each other over the keys to power. Hugh and his contemporaries lived in a world shaped and still shaken by an ongoing Investiture Crisis, where the contest over whether the Papacy or the Crown would appoint bishops had led to, among other disasters, the excommunication of the Holy Roman Emperor and the sacking of Rome. If Prester John was both a holy priest and a secular monarch, then he was the kind of leader that many in Europe would long to meet face-to-face.

Just how deeply this figure resonated with Christendom's growing anxieties and utopian yearnings became evident two decades later when Prester John wrote Europe a letter. The original missive apparently surfaced sometime in the mid 1160s, though no twelfth-century copy of it survives and all we now



possess are later versions. This elaborate hoax began by imitating the diction of ordinary diplomatic correspondence, and was addressed, logically enough, to the Byzantine Emperor, whose domains abutted the Muslim territory from whose far side this fellow Christian purported to write: "John the Presbyter, by the grace of God and the strength of our Lord Jesus Christ, king of kings and lord of lords, to his friend Manuel, Governor of the Byzantines, greetings, wishing him health and the continued enjoyment of divine blessing."<sup>6</sup> This by-the-book preamble is followed by a piece of one-upmanship also quite common in diplomatic discourse, establishing who admired whom first. "Our Majesty has been informed that you hold our Excellency in esteem, and that knowledge of our greatness has reached you. Furthermore we have heard from our secretary that it was your wish to send us some objects of art and interest, for our pleasure. Since we are but human we take this in good part, and through our secretary we forward to you some of our articles." His priority thus established, the Prester continues in the same vein, declaring that it is he who must be assured of the Byzantine's orthodoxy, not the other way around. "Now it is our desire to know whether you hold the true faith, and adhere in all things to our lord Jesus Christ; for while we know that we are mortal, your little Greeks regard you as a god; still we know that you are mortal, and subject to human weaknesses." This phrase is a strong clue that the letter's actual writer was himself a Latin Christian rather than a Byzantine,<sup>7</sup> and various suppositions about our author's identity will be aired in due course. For now, what is striking is that the imposter has taken pains to establish a clear sense of genre — this is a document of state from a sovereign who is quite comfortable with the forms through which foreign relations are conducted — a move that constructs a frame of plausibility and normality around the many wondrous accounts that are to follow.

Soon after this preamble comes the central message of hope, which can be boiled down to this: I am powerful; I am Christian; I am coming. "If indeed you wish to know wherein consists our great power, then believe without doubting that I, Prester John, who reign supreme, exceed in riches, virtue, and power all creatures who dwell under heaven. Seventy-two kings pay tribute to me. I am a devout Christian and everywhere protect the Christians of our empire, nourishing them with alms. We have made a vow to visit the sepulchre of our Lord with a very great army, as befits the glory of our Majesty, to wage war against and chastise the enemies of the cross of Christ, and to exalt his sacred name." Here the author has taken care that his fabrication will not be exposed as such if its promised hero fails to arrive anytime soon, for though the Prester has taken an oath to liberate the Holy Land, he makes no mention of when he intends to begin that campaign. However, this somewhat hazy promise is quickly followed by geographical information designed to assure one and all that the distances involved shall be no obstacle to his westward