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Christopher Eric Taylor

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**Waiting For Prester John:
The Legend, the Fifth Crusade, and Medieval Christian Holy War**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Geraldine Heng

Elizabeth Scala

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Christopher Eric Taylor, B.A.

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2011

Abstract

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Christopher Eric Taylor, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Geraldine Heng

In considering the increasing interest in the study of a global Middle Ages, there seem to be few individuals, either fictional or actual, that had a more powerful cosmopolitan currency than the figure of Prester John and the legends surrounding his kingdom. As a product of cultural imaginings and questionably recounted historical events, the search for and legitimization of Prester John has commanded consistent interest, both popular and scholarly, almost continuously since first mention of the figure of John in 1145. The now infamous *Letter of Prester John*, which details the magnificent Christian kingdom lying somewhere in the East, beyond the approaching threat of an ever-expanding Islam, has long catalyzed a hunt, by both adventurers and scholars, to seek the elusive patriarch. The very indeterminacy of the geographic location of Prester John allowed the European imagination to consequently imagine him *everywhere* precisely because he could neither be confirmed nor denied existence *anywhere*. This report will explore the ways that a reading of the Prester John legend reveals competing ambitions of enclosure and expansion within twelfth and thirteenth-century Latin Christendom, specifically around the time of the Fifth Crusade. This report will trace the ideational tensions within a presumed Christian Crusading West trying to legitimate itself against the dialectical buttress of what was increasingly professed as its heretical other, Islam. The Fifth Crusade, especially, seemed to hinge on the possibility of the harmonious convergence of Eastern and Western Christian powers, literalizing the sense of Christian enclosure around all of Islam. Prester John's kingdom thus served two functions: first, to comprise the other half of the Christian enclosure, and secondly, to mark a phenomenological limit point of human experience that domesticated alterity under the banner of a sovereign priest-king.

Table of Contents

WAITING FOR PRESTER JOHN	1
Introduction	1
From the Beginning: The Development of the Legend of Prester John	11
Reading the <i>Letter</i>	17
Uncanny Doubles: St. Thomas/Edessa; Muhammad/Nestorius	35
Waiting For Prester John	51
Bibliography	58

WAITING FOR PRESTER JOHN

Introduction

It is the year 1222. Intelligence relayed from Prince Bohemond IV to Jacques de Vitry reaches crusaders anxiously waiting in Damietta. The intelligence, a report written in Arabic obtained from traveling spice merchants in Antioch, details the westward military progression of a certain King David, purportedly the great-grandson of the famed Prester John, a military leader who, rumor has it, has systematically destroyed Muslim armies in the east. Jacques has the report, later called the Relatio de Davide, translated immediately. He then sends letters containing parts of the Relatio to Pope Honorius, King Henry III of England, Duke Leopold of Austria, and to the academics at the University of Paris. Spirits lift within and without the crusader camp, essentially renewing the hope for a Christian recovery of Jerusalem. The de facto crusade leader at Damietta, Cardinal Pelagius, in dire need of good news, interprets this Arabic report as linked to a local prediction, the Arabic Prophecy of Hannan, Son of Agip. The prophecy augurs the arrival of a certain “King of the Abissi” who conquers Mecca in order to “scatter the bones of Mahomet.”¹ Pelagius sees himself as the tall man with a lean face

¹ Bernard Hamilton, “Continental Drift: Prester John’s Progress through the Indies,” *Prester John, the Mongols, and the Ten Lost Tribes*, ed. C.F. Buckingham and B. Hamilton (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 243. According to Hamilton, this prophecy, originally written in Arabic, was an update of the work of a ninth-century Persian Nestorian scholar, Hunan Ibn Ishak, and “Abissi” refers to the Abyssinians (in Ethiopia). Hamilton believes that a Coptic Christian wrote the copy of the prophecy that Pelagius obtained. More recently, Christopher Tyerman has suggested that the prophecy was a product of the time in which it was interpreted, and was written around 1220 by a nearby Egyptian Nestorian. See Tyerman, *God’s War: A New History of the Crusades* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2006), 642. For more on the contents of the

whom the prophecy foretells would invade Egypt and capture Damietta, since Pelagius had done just that in 1219. The crusaders are also restlessly awaiting the appearance of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II— a figure in crusade history who was always in the process of arriving and whose imminent appearance finally seems certain.

Frederick's arrival, like John's, is predicted by a second prophecy, extracted by Cardinal Pelagius from the Book of Clement, announcing the impending dissolution of Islam, which is fated to occur after the collapse of Muslim-controlled Damietta in November 1219— an event which had already been accurately prophesied and fulfilled.² According to the Book of Clement, the collapse of Islam would occur when a King from the East (presumably Prester John, or one of his descendants) and one from the West (Frederick) met in Jerusalem during a year when Easter fell on the third day of April. By happiest coincidence, that would be this very year, 1222. Buoyed by prophecy, the crusaders at Damietta, heedless of local conditions, decide to invade Cairo immediately, rejecting an agreement with the Sultan Al-Kamil that would have given Jerusalem back to the crusaders in exchange for Damietta. The Nile rises, turning the invasion of Cairo into defeat. The armies of the Fifth Crusade surrender to the Sultan of Egypt, Al-Kamil, Saladin's nephew, a few weeks later.

prophecy, see P. Pelliot, "Deux passages de 'la prophétie de Hannan fils d'Issac,'" *Prester John, the Mongols, and the Ten Lost Tribes*, ed. C.F. Buckingham and B. Hamilton (Aldershot: Varorium, 1996), 113-138.

² Hamilton, 246. The *Book of Clement*, or *Apocalypse of Peter*, was thought to have been a written account of actual prophecies made by St. Peter and recorded by St. Clement of Rome. The actual text, written in Arabic, that Pelagius received, has unfortunately not been preserved and neither has the Latin translation that Pelagius commissioned. The information about Pelagius receiving the prophecy comes to us from Oliver of Paderborn, *Historia Damiatina*, c.35. Hoogeweg, O. ed. (1894) *Die Schriften es kölnen Domscholasters, späteren Bischofs von Paderborn und Kardinal –Bischofs von S. Sabina Oliverus, Bibliothek des Litterarischen des Litterarischen Vereins in Stuttgart*, CCII, Tübingen, 232-259.

In crusading history, the power of prophecy was central for Latin Christians who were eager to assimilate the strange and swift rise of Islam into the logic of an eschatological history of Christianity. The crusading period birthed numerous prophecies and theories about the significance of crusading and of Islam, and yet no narrative has sustained interest for contemporaneity and posterity quite like the Prester John legend. Not only did the legend have direct and dire consequences for the Fifth Crusade, but it also affected medieval understanding of spiritual and physical geography. Although born partially of a real historical misunderstanding, the figure Prester John accumulated significance during the tumultuous time of the Crusades, when it became a floating signifier onto which medieval Latin Christians could attach hopes and anxieties about sameness and alterity. During the twelfth and thirteenth-centuries especially, a time when the solidity of a *societas Christiana* was in flux, I argue that Prester John offered ideological security by providing a vessel through which the fantasy of a boundless Christianity that topographically enclosed the rest of the world could be projected.

The legend of Prester John and his magnificent kingdom has captivated scholarly and lay audiences from the twelfth-century through the twenty-first. After the appearance of the Prester John legend in the mid-twelfth-century, centuries of subsequent travel narratives about the East have required at least a mention of John's kingdom in their accounts. Sober efforts to seek out the land of Prester John lasted through the eighteenth century, and the imaginative import of the legendary figure lives on in twentieth-century

adventure novels, comic books, and medievalist historical fiction.³ Thus, as regular scholarly and lay attention to him suggests, we are still waiting on Prester John. We wait, like twelfth-century Christians, even though John is always returning, but never for the reasons we have historically pinned to him. I am here attempting to situate this project on the legend of Prester John and the historiographical responses to it in relation to a question posed by L.O. Aranye Fradeburg in *Sacrifice Your Love*: “Does our skepticism about the signifier’s ability to return simply enable a certain overconfidence in *our* power to obliterate strangeness?”⁴ For it is in my view that we are clearly not “over” or “beyond” Prester John; rather, the frequency under which Prester John as signifier materializes while remaining underdetermined suggests our historical reticence to accept its necessary iterability. The reading of Prester John that I attempt is one that traces that very insolubility instead of waiting for a finality under which the constitutive alterity of John might resolve into a single and homogenous significance.

Scholars have turned to the Prester John legend for in order to discern information on medieval geography, to determine the precise location of John’s imaginary kingdom,

³ For medievalists, Umberto Eco’s *Baudolino* (2000) is likely the most recognizable popular representation of Prester John. The novel is a reimagining of the opaque circumstances under which the legend first proliferated. Although in Eco’s fictional account the *Letter of Prester John* is fabricated, the main characters do set out and actually visit John’s exotic kingdom. See Eco, *Baudolino*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000). John Buchan’s pro-colonial adventure novel *Prester John* (1910), still in print, tells a story of cultural clash when a Scotsman in South Africa must deal with a Zulu uprising strangely connected to medieval legend of Prester John. See Buchan, *Prester John* (New York: George Doran Company, 1910). Stranger still, and perhaps as a result of the popularity of Buchan’s novel, Prester John began to appear in pulp novels and comics, most famously in the Marvel Comics *Fantastic Four* and *Thor*. In these highly popular comics, Prester John, enemy of Muslim warriors and also called “The Wanderer,” was kept alive by wizards after a plague decimated his kingdom (an island called Avalon). He appears in over twenty comics of the Marvel Universe (mostly in the 1960’s).

⁴ See *Sacrifice Your Love: Historicism, Chaucer, Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 2002), 49.

to document the effect of the legend on later texts, and, more recently, to discuss the way in which John's realm constitutes a utopian space onto which Latin Christians could map the anxieties of religious and cultural alterity. However, the actual content of the original *Letter of Prester John* has been understudied and its relation to the extended attempts by twelfth-century Latin Christians to understand and enclose Muslim otherness into an encompassing Christian narrative have been underdetermined. In this essay, I will consider the implications of the Latin Christian assumption that Prester John and his Christian kingdom in fact existed, speculate on the reasons why so many Christians maintained this belief, and analyze the significance of the topographical site of John's kingdom. A close analysis of the Prester John legend, through the twelfth-century Latin *Letter of Prester John* and its earlier source texts will shed considerable light on the culture of the Fifth Crusade and will provide insight into the intertwined development of the legend in the context of holy war between medieval Christianity and medieval Islam.

This essay will consider Prester John's impact on the Latin Christian world of the twelfth-century, and also seek the structures in place that allowed such the significance of the legend to proliferate. Following Geraldine Heng's contention in *Empire of Magic* that "it is important not to underestimate the material force of cultural mythology nor the impact of imaginative belief in the ordering of the world's relations," I will attempt to measure the ideological significance of the Prester John legend against a horizon of anxiety-ridden cultural identity.⁵ I argue against scholarship that situates Prester John's

⁵ Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 285.

kingdom in the history of utopic imagining, and instead discuss the ways in which the Prester John legend topographically provides the Latin west a false sense of Christian enclosure.⁶ I will show that a motif of enclosure simultaneously contains and reifies crucial questions of otherness embodied by Islam and that this motif resounds throughout the military strategies, mythical constructions, and other historical and cultural features of medieval Christian holy war. According to this reading, the legend of Prester John ultimately signifies the Latin Christian reticence to engage ideologically with Islam in a direct manner, providing instead an imagined Christian community from which the West can better control the relationship between Christian and Muslim identity.

Lastly, in exploring the textual and historical associations circulating around stories of St. Thomas' tomb and Prester John's kingdom, I will show that these presumably western legends actually owe more to their engagement with Islamic tradition than they do with familiar Christian characteristics. Prester John, who inhabits a Christianized Islamic paradise, and St. Thomas, whose tomb relied on the same debunked miracle as Muhammad's, will be shown to have reacted directly to western conceptions of Islam. By externalizing their reactions to and anxieties about Islam, western Christians renounce their own connection to Islam: it is Prester John and the mythic east that are in competition with Islam, not western Christians. In other words, Prester John was the

⁶ On the Prester John legend as desire for utopia see, for example, Leonardo Olschki, "Der Brief des Presbyters Johannes," *Historische Zeitschrift* 144 (1931): 1-14; Karl Helleiner, "Prester John's Letter: A Mediaeval Utopia" *The Phoenix* 13.2 (1959): 47-57; Martin Gosman, "La royaume du Prêtre Jean: l'interprétation du bonheur," in *L'idée de bonheur au moyen âge: actes du Colloque d'Amiens de mars 1984* (Göppingen, 1990), 213-23. For more recent and theoretically inflected explorations of the Prester John legend and utopia, see Michael Uebel's work on the legend, including his most sustained analysis in *Ecstatic Transformation: On the Uses of Alterity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

imagined projection of a culture of faith facing a crisis of identity. Ultimately, John offered the promise of a self-reflexive Christian identity that would inaugurate a time of universal Christian rule. By providing an anchoring point from which the events of religious conflict might be cast into their desired eschatological significance, the arrival of Prester John is then the event which signals the reality of earthly salvation.

For Latin Christians, anxiety and insecurity were, of course, tempered by faith. Prophecy and legend were useful ways to make intelligible the difficulties and setbacks faced by the crusading movement, and to situate war with Islam within a Christianized teleological narrative. Crusading was a form of pilgrimage, holy war, and *imitatio Christi*, giving Latin Christians who crusaded confidence that they were God's chosen people. Yet, beginning in the late twelfth-century, Muslims held Jerusalem (the navel of the world) and had even recaptured the first Crusader state ever established, Edessa. How was this state of things possible? Crusade leaders turned to divinations under the belief that God was testing them. Although it was not yet readily apparent whether Islam represented a "divine scourge" or whether Muhammad was the heresiarch meant to usher in the Apocalypse, it was certain that Islam's military impact was linked to its significance in the narrative of Christian history.

Western Christians were accustomed to theological hostility toward Judaism and, historically, they were familiar with the territorial encroachments of pagan tribes. The example of Muslim-occupied Spain, however, suggested that, with the threat posed by Islam, territorial and ideological dangers were intertwined. In the twelfth and thirteenth

centuries especially, Latin Christians found themselves trying to carve out a definitive *societas Christiana*, in part because Europe had begun to look dangerously heterogeneous. Impelled by Gregorian reform, the rise of new monastic orders, and the most significant persecution of heresy in five hundred years, Latin Christians of the twelfth-century faced significant epistemological crises, both internal and external.⁷ Ostensibly, the crusading movements of the late eleventh century and after were about the recapturing of the Holy Land, but the goals of crusading also overlapped with the contemporary drive to root out heresy on the way to establishing a truly universal Christendom.

The ‘King David’ so eagerly awaited by the armies of the Fifth Crusade at Damietta, proved to be a Christianized miscognition of the historical Genghis Khan, whose recounted exploits were reshaped into the *Relatio de Davide*. The *Relatio*, which purportedly heralded King David’s arrival, was brought to Damietta during a critical moment in the Fifth Crusade and probably underwent some propagandistic revision to bolster the hopes of the crusaders.⁸ According to Jacques de Vitry, the *Relatio*’s

⁷ R.I. Moore discusses the new threats to western Europe in the twelfth-century and their responses in his two works, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1988) and *The Origins of European Dissent* (London: Allen Lane Publishing, 1977). Curiously, neither book says much about the impact of Islam on twelfth-century Christians’ conceptions of heresy, which will become a primary theme for John Tolan and the work of more recent historians.

⁸ At the very least, Jacques edited the text. Jean Richard notes that there are three versions of the text, each of which gives a slightly different account of the facts. The most elaborate account exists in a letter of Jacques where he refers to the text as an *excerpta*, indicating that he may have transcribed the text with some editorial cuts. For more on the text of the *Relatio de Davide* and its bearing on the Fifth Crusade, see Richard, “The *Relatio de Davide* as a source for Mongol History and the Legend of Prester John,” in *Prester John, the Mongols, and the Ten Lost Tribes*, ed. Beckingham and Hamilton (Aldershot:

information, which otherwise might have been discounted as untrustworthy or heretical because it came from Arabic sources, was legitimated by the fact that Bohemond himself obtained the information from Arab spies he kept in Outremer. When Jacques had the Arabic translated into Latin, he was able to Christianize the Mongol's accomplishments and to localize the historical events by presenting them in his letters. This tale was contextualized by a legend in medieval Latin Christendom that was already well-known by this time, the story of Prester John. David's lineage was therefore tethered to that of the famed (and equally fictitious) Prester John.⁹

The degree to which Jacques honestly believed in a relation between John and King David or whether instead the great propagandist was simply motivating crusaders, remains uncertain. In either case, earlier European discovery of the existence of eastern Christians during pilgrimages to and from the Crusader states had created an expectation that Christians were, in fact, achieving global presence. Crusading was accumulating an expanding importance, and it seems that Jacques realized these political, religious, and cultural developments. Latin Christians were not only battling for territorial security, they were also fighting on behalf of the nascent notion of universal Christendom, and the fantasy of ideological and theological supremacy that accompanied these power structures. It is from this point of departure, over seventy years after the initial appearance of the legendary figure, that I will situate the Prester John legend so that I

Variorum, 1996), 139-155. See also C. d'Ohsson, *Histoire des Mongols*, Vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Les Frères Van Cleef 1835), 629-631.

⁹ Hamilton writes that Jacques de Vitry's "quite logical misconceptions" concerning the *Relatio de Davide* were "compounded by the eschatological fervor of Cardinal Pelagius," 245.

might retrace his path through the historical imaginary. First as arrogant heretic and then as Crusading savior— why was Prester John worth finding.

From the Beginning: The Development of the Legend of Prester John

The first record of Prester John occurs in German Bishop Otto of Friesing's 1145 *Historia de duabus civitatibus*, a chronicle of Christian history based loosely on a comparison between the heavenly kingdom of Jerusalem and the earthly kingdom of Babel. In the *Historia*, Otto, the uncle of Frederick Barbarossa and a reliable historical authority, receives a compelling story from Bishop Hugh of Jabala, in Syria, an active member in the high polity of the church. Hugh tells Otto that while he was at the court of Pope Eugenius III, he heard talk of "a certain Iohannes," a presumably Nestorian Christian prince descended from the Three Magi, living "beyond Persia and Armenia," who in a recently conquered Persia had attempted to march to Jerusalem to help the crusaders but was thwarted by a flooded Tigris River.¹⁰

Twentieth-century historians have since shown convincingly that Hugh's account refers to the defeat of the Seljuk Sultan Sanjar by the Qara Khitai (who were mostly a mix of Nestorian Christians and Muslims), under a certain Yeh-lü Dashi in 1141. Hardly a group of utopic Christians, the Qara Khitai, a nomadic tribe descending from Manchuria, represented the vestiges of the Liao Dynasty, and had recently established an empire in Central Asia. Like the prophecies of the Fifth Crusade, Otto's *Historia* betrays the zeal of western Christians to translate the happenings of the east into discernibly

¹⁰ Hamilton, 238. Presumably, if the dates are correct, Hugh was in Rome for the specific purpose of reporting to Pope Eugenius that Edessa had fallen to Muslim control. Raymond, Prince of Antioch, had sent Hugh to Rome in 1144 to deliver the news. The Pope issued a bull inaugurating the Second Crusade less than a year later. As we shall see, the fall of Edessa becomes inextricably linked to the Prester John legend, indicated especially in the Latin *Letter*.

useful material for Christian eschatology to support the desire for a universal *societas Christiana*.

It remains yet a mystery why so credible a historian as Hugh would write about Prester John without knowing anything about him, as well as how the fictional John's actual historical counterpart Yeh-lü Dashi became westernized not only in name but also in intent. In other words, there seems to be no plausible explanation of why John, supposedly a Nestorian Christian, and thus a heretic by Latin Christian standards, should be thought to want to assist in a Latin Christian recovery of Jerusalem, and moreover be *desired* for such a mission.¹¹ Perhaps for Otto (and Hugh), John's plan to aid the Latins implicitly signified his intention to adopt Latin Christianity, thus making Hugh's story a conversion narrative of sorts. The desire to eliminate heresy was at the time coupled with the desire to convert heretics—a Christianity divided from within could never build the stockades able to withstand external pressures from without. Prester John, perhaps, effectively represented this tension. Given that Edessa, the earliest established Crusader state, had been lost to the Seljuks in 1144, months before the completion of Otto's *Historia*, crusaders were also looking for divine signs from God that supported their actions. Yet nothing in Otto's narrative account of John suggests that Prester John was

¹¹ Many modern historians' accounts of the Prester John legend creatively hypothesize etymological mazes that might possibly Latinize the name of the Mongol prince. While interesting and legitimate, I prefer to place emphasis on the fact that some among the Mongols *were* Christianized. For one interesting theory on the reasons behind Otto's narrative, see Robert Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972). Silverberg suggests that that Bishop Hugh was perhaps trying to dissuade the Pope from believing in the omnipotence of Prester John, a figure who might render unnecessary the deployment of European armies to the Holy Land. Because Hugh mentions that Prester John had to turn back, for Silverberg, "Bishop Hugh's narrative, therefore seems designed to puncture Europe's existing faith in the power of Prester John" (8).

that answer to crusader crises—in fact, the text explicitly states that John and his army had been forced to turn back before reaching Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, Karl Helleiner contends that the bearer of this message, Hugh, used this anecdote to bolster a plea for a military expedition.¹² In effect, by emphasizing the timeliness of Prester John's supposed intervention in Islamic-Christian conflict, the message of a Christian military intervention from the east provided a strategic fantasy in which Muslim armies appeared to be surrounded from the west and the east in a Christian military enclosure.¹³ This projective intervention is notable for its historical coincidence with another response to the influx of Islam that valorized a topographical enclosure in order to dissipate the Islamic threat, the first Latin translation of the Qur'an.

Commissioned in 1143 by the powerful Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, the translation, called *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete*, was the centerpiece of a planned codex of the whole of Muslim doctrine, which would then be authoritatively critiqued and refuted. Analogous to the military enclosure suggested by the Prester John rumors, the translation allowed Christians to linguistically enclose the message of Islam as conveyed by the Qur'an into the language of the Christian Church and to surround the Islamic message with Christian glosses, commentary, and marginal notes.¹⁴

These fantasies of enclosure represented not only imagined strategies for retaking lost strongholds (Edessa) and capturing new ones under the banner of a Latin

¹² Karl Helleiner, "Prester John's Letter: A Mediaeval Utopia," 50.

¹³ Ibid., 51.

¹⁴ The best sustained analysis of the importance, context, and application of the 1143 Latin translation of the Qur'an by Robert of Ketton can be found in Thomas Burman, *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn Press, 2007).

Christendom, but also indicate the hope that destiny of Islam be translated into the narrative of Christianity precisely because of the intimacy shared between the two religions— especially now that Muslims were in Jerusalem, the symbolic center of Christian identity. Before the legend of Prester John provided the Latin European imagination a more fully-realized Eastern fantasy *via* the *Letter*, fantasies of enclosure were thus already circulating around Europe, projecting the hope of a stable epistemological identity that the *Letter* will also address.

After its initial appearance in 1145, the legend of Prester John goes unremarked until 1165 (perhaps because the much hoped-for Christian potentate never appeared), when a letter reportedly authored by Prester John materialized in Constantinople, addressed to Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenus.¹⁵ The oldest known versions of the *Letter* are all addressed to him despite their being written in Latin: no Greek version has yet been found. Although ostensibly addressed to the Byzantine emperor, the *Letter* was likely intended to circulate around Latin Europe, rather than the territories of the Greek empire held by Manuel.

The Latin Christian appropriation of a letter apparently written for the east highlights its status as purloined, basically from inception. From its early circulation to the actual location of John's kingdom, the legend is deeply grounded in nomadic indeterminacy.

¹⁵ For a detailed investigation of the historical conditions surrounding the original letter as well as an excellent study of its style and analysis, see Vsevolod Slessarev, *Prester John: The Letter and the Legend*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), 32-54. For the still-authoritative critical edition of the Latin manuscripts, see Friedrich Zarncke, "Der Priester Johannes," in *Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Classe der königlich sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften*, 7, (1879), 872-934. All Latin quotations from the *Letter* are taken from this source.

Much scholarly effort has been exerted on recovering the location of Prester John's kingdom, with scholars often tracing the descriptions in the *Letter* and their coincidence with historical events in order to determine a geographic locale.¹⁶ Though such research might be integral to the work of scholars of medieval geography or cartography. For scholars of literary and cultural studies, the indeterminate geographic location of Prester John is the salient fact. That indeterminacy encouraged a communal Christian European imagination to imagine John *everywhere* precisely because he could neither be confirmed nor denied existence *anywhere*.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this fantasy of ubiquity and absence, scholarly demand for geographic specificity and historical accuracy in the *Letter* imitates medieval Latin Europe's own desires to believe in and to locate a *real* Prester John.¹⁷ Our contemporary disbelief in a real historical Prester John does negate the fact that there remains a desire to validate the legend in one way or another. Rather than attempt to

¹⁶See, e.g., L.N. Gumilev, *Searches For an Imaginary Kingdom*, trans. R.E.F. Smith, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Bernard Hamilton, "Prester John and the Three Kings of Cologne" *Prester John, the Mongols, and the Ten Lost Tribes*, ed. Beckingham and Hamilton, (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 171-185; Igor de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), 19-40; Silverberg, 74-324; Slessarev, 80-92. In addressing the problematic aspects of investigating a legend that surveys such a large geographical and temporal span, I follow Michael Brooks advocacy of the importance of "making associative connections across these linguistic, geographic, and temporal barriers;" see "Prester John: A Reexamination and Compendium of the Mythical Figure Who Helped Spark European Expansion." PhD Diss, U of Toledo, 2009. One of these pitfalls of analyzing such a narrow figure of a broad span of time and space is the tendency to over-specialize and lose sight of the larger picture. Therefore, like Brooks, understanding the impossibility of a complete fidelity to such a large historical body of time and space, I will nevertheless attempt to deal with the Prester John legend in terms of its larger scale implications.

¹⁷ Here, Prester John, whose importance in the cultural imaginary is inversely related to his material visibility, accords well with Elizabeth Scala's discussion on "absent presences," figures whose absence, whether literal or figurative, centrally defines their 'presence' in a text. See *Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

discover the origins of the Prester John legend or identifying his kingdom's location, I will instead use Prester John's geographical ubiquity and nomadic mobility of his cultural and historical significance as a starting point.

The lack of a definite location for Prester John and the ongoing desire to pinpoint his kingdom aligns with a larger concern with borders beginning to surface for twelfth-century Latin Christians. Within Latin Christendom, the increased persecution of heresy indicated a desire to regulate the points of contestation, or boundaries, of Christianity with aims to establish self-evident and recognizable dimensions for a wholly Christian subject.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Christian Crusaders were fighting to preserve and extend the territorial borders of a *societas Christiana* whose identity was already in flux. Put simply, the Prester John *Letter* echoed the anxieties and desires of its audience. Beginning with an analysis of the Latin *Letter* I show that Prester John's dual status as a figure of both liminality and familiarity ultimately secured his place in the European imaginary as a symbol of a universal Christianity, even in its occasional deviance from both western and Christian customs.

¹⁸ In emphasizing the rise in persecution rather than the escalation of actual heresies, I am following Ian Hunter, John Christian Laursen and Cary Nederman who resist the often-held claims that Christian heresies increased exponentially after 1100. For the, the increased attention to heresy "reflect[s] an upswing in theological zeal on the part of consolidating political and ecclesiastical institutions." See *Heresy in Transition: The Ideas of Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Ashgate, 2005), 3. My suggestion is that this zeal, taken in context with the Crusades and the Prester John legend, might indicate instead an anxiety about borders and identity rather than a persecutorial desire. Therefore, while Hunter et al. see the Fourth Lateran Council, with its "comprehensive standars for inclusion in and exclusion from the community of Christian believers" as the "apogee of the persecutorial impuse during the Latin Middle ages," I read it as the culmination of a desire to regulate what had hiterto been a largely permeable Christian identity (4).

Reading the *Letter*

In the *Letter*, Prester John professes to be a devout Christian king of an immense and militarily powerful kingdom somewhere beyond the Medes and Persians. There he rules over the Three Indias: “*In tribus Indiis dominatur magnificentia nostra.*”¹⁹ From the beginning, the *Letter*’s author employs a condescending tone toward Manuel, which contrasts ironically with John’s self-expressed humility and the *Letter*’s avowal of the Greek Emperor’s arrogance: “*Cum enim hominem nos esse cognoscamus, te Graeculi tui Deum esse existimant* [While we know ourselves to be mortal, the little Greeks regard you as a god].”²⁰ Prester John professes to be a devout Christian striving to protect all Christians through his sovereignty and hospitality, and the “*largitatis nostrae munificentia*” or “munificence of our liberality” places him among the idealized rulers of the Middle Ages, both real (Charlemagne) and imagined (Arthur).²¹ In the *Letter*, Prester John invites Manuel to enjoy the abundant riches of John’s kingdom as well as all

¹⁹ Zarncke, 910. Slessarev gives a summarized translation on 34-46. For a complete English translation of the Latin letter, see the appendix in Michael Uebel, *Ecstatic Transformation: On the Uses of Alterity in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 155-160. All quotations of the English translation of the Latin *Letter* are taken from Uebel’s appendix. Additionally, despite the *Letter*’s claim that John resided in India, there is no evidence of a Christian principality in India at the time of the *Letter*’s appearance, which has prompted confusion over the meaning of “India” during the period of the legend. Much has been written on medieval conceptions of geography concentrating on the vast region called India. For an exhaustive study of medieval geography and the myths that influenced it, see John Kirtland Wright, *Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades*, (New York: American Geographical Society, 1925), esp. 155-160.

²⁰ Zarncke, 910; Uebel, 54.

²¹ Zarncke, 910; Uebel, 155.

treasures he wishes to bring back west.²² John also makes clear his plans to visit the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and to aid crusaders.

The *Letter's* use of superlatives affords John's kingdom a utopic possibility rendered simultaneously attainable for the West (because of its shared Christian values) and uncannily unfathomable (as situated in an East historically laden with mystique and considered a locus of the unknown or unknowable). Yet throughout the *Letter*, there is a clear emphasis to make coincident Occidental familiarities and the unfathomable limit point from which those ideals are perfectly manifest. The superlative wealth of Prester John's kingdom surpasses "all the riches which are under heaven" [*dominus sum dominatium et praeello in omnibus divitiis*] aligns John with traditional accounts of eastern wealth but also sets his kingdom apart not only from other eastern kingdoms, but from all other earthly kingdoms. In terms of (Christian) virtue and power, Prester John eclipses "all the kings of the wide world" [*vitue et potentia omnes reges universae terrae*]. The geography of the kingdom is plotted as thoroughly Christian even as it asymptotically approaches the very bounds of the earth: "from the farthest India, where the body of St. Thomas the Apostle rests, to the place where the sun rises" [*In tribus Indiis dominatur mangiticentia nostra, et transit terra nostra ab ulteriore India, in qua corpus sancti Thomae apostoli requiescit*].²³ Thus, the professed riches of John's realm

²²Ibid., 910: "Quodsi ad dominatioenem nostram venire volueris, maiorem et digniorem domas nostrae te constituemus, et poteris frui habundantia nostra, et ex his, quae apud nos habundant, si redire volueris, locupletatus redibis"

²³ Ibid., 910.

confirm western fantasies of an exotic east teeming with treasures while at the same time imaginatively appropriating these riches for western hopes via John's Christianity.

Along with Christianizing the exotic landscape of the East, the *Letter* unites East and West under his protective banner, and therefore hints at the possibility of a truly universal Christendom. When John promises to defend Christendom, east and west, against all enemies, it seems clear that the *inimicos* of which he speaks are the same Muslim warriors with which the West was contemporaneously occupied:

*Devotus sum christianus, et ubique paupers christianos, quos clementiae nostrae regit imperium, defendimus et elemosinis nostris sustentamus. In voto habemus visitare sepulchrum domini cum maximo exercita, prout decet gloriam maiestatis nostrae humiliare et debellare inimicos crucis Chrsti et nomen eius benedictum exaltare.*²⁴

Speaking presumably as a Nestorian (although the *Letter* never identifies him as such) and uniting himself and his faith with Catholic ideals, the *inimicos*—enemies of the Cross— mentioned here are clearly Muslim, given the time period and context, and this passage has been read as John's pledge to join the crusading movement.²⁵ Here, the

²⁴ Zarncke, 910. The English: "I am a devout Christian, and everywhere do we defend poor Christians, whom the empire of our clemency rules, and we sustain them with alms. We have vowed to visit the Sepulcher of the Lord with the greatest army, just as it is befitting the glory of our majesty, in order to humble and defeat the enemies of the cross of Christ and to exalt his blessed name," (Uebel, 155).

²⁵ Prester John's Nestorianism is strangely missing from the content of the original *Letter*. Otto of Friesing's supposedly historical account that preceded the *Letter* identifies John with the popular eastern Nestorian Christian sect (334-35) and Mandeville's mid-fourteenth-century reimagining of Prester John, which uses the original epistle as a source, posits the king as thoroughly Nestorian and suggests that such associations had been circulating far before Mandeville's work. Slessarev reads the original *Letter*'s association between John and St. Thomas (a very important figure for Nestorian Christians) as an implicit

Letter seems to redirect the “persecutorial impulse” of twelfth-century Christians away from the inwardly directed interstices of Christian identity and, imposing a strong sense of a united and universal Christendom, focus these energies on a clearly defined *external* enemy. This rhetorical move is significant not only because it obviates the notion of heresy but also because it attempts to posit Islam as something *other* than Christian heresy, something completely separate and therefore less threatening. For many twelfth-century Christians, including those who produced the first Latin Qur’an, Islam was Christian heresy, and the *Letter*’s intervention in this debate will accumulate significance as this discussion resumes in a later section. John’s realm’s boundlessness suggests the illimitability of Christendom, while its vaguely eastern geography guarantees a topographical enclosure, or final limit, of the budding Islamic empire.

It is significant that the *Letter* not only mentions St. Thomas, who would be the best known (if not the only) Christian figure associated with India, but also that it uses the legend of Thomas as a geographical marker. The particular double qualities of this usage remind the reader that despite John’s kingdom’s exotic locale, this land can indeed claim a legitimate and recognizable Christian forebear. However, the choice of Thomas is symptomatic of *Letter*’s larger efforts to not appear entirely comfortable for Western Christians, as Thomas was also the disciple most often associated with Nestorian Christians (heretics).

acknowledgement of the former’s Nestorianism (14). For the reading of this passage signalling a pledge to join the Crusading movement, see Heng, 283, 446.

The rest of the *Letter* draws upon content from traditional accounts of the marvelous, including the Alexander legends, along with lapidaries, bestiaries, and material ranging from Herodotus to Isidore of Seville—that is, material concerning the East that would be familiar to its Western audience.²⁶ The *Letter*'s use of circulating legendary material establishes a precedent for the kingdom and offers John, as the ruler of this entire land, as a sovereign powerful enough to absorb this history of the unfamiliar without remainder. Nothing escapes his Christian domestication, however unfamiliar it seems. Under the threat of the Other, Prester John and Christianity prevail. Despite the fact that of the seventy-two kings that pay tribute to John, the *Letter* makes a point to mention that “few are Christian” (*paucae sunt christianorum*).²⁷ Prester John not only resides in the mysterious East, he owns and has domesticated a fantasy space that is the accumulated product of more than a millennium of travel accounts, legends, myths and tales of the Oriental marvel.

After mentioning the relative paucity of Christians within John's realm, the author of the *Letter* moves on to an inventory of some of the land's creatures. After beginning with the most familiar creatures (camels and elephants), the *Letter* then mentions some well-known mythical creatures (griffins, phoenix, and satyrs), and ends with the more

²⁶ Zarncke notes the passages in the *Letter* lifted from the Alexander Legend and a medieval lapidary. For the most thorough exploration of the sources contributing to the *Letter*, see Malcolm Letts, “Prester John. Sources and Illustrations,” *Notes and Queries* 188 (1945): 178-180 and Charles V. Langlois, *La vie en France au moyen âge*, vol. 3 (Paris: Hachette, 1925), 44-45.

²⁷ According to Isidore of Seville, the world was composed of seventy-two tribes of people. The fact that John rules over seventy-two kings suggests that John is clearly a universal ruler. See *Etymologies*, Vol. 1, trans. Priscilla Throop (Charlotte, VT: MedievalMS, 2005).

monstrous (dog-headed men, giants, one-eyed men).²⁸ The list form is common to the travel narrative tradition: here, the author enumerates the many wonders of his kingdom, which can be seen as metonymically representing an impossible totality conveyed by way of a sense of the infinite. Much like the trope of a catalogue of heroes in epic literature, the list's apparent endlessness serves also, in Michael Uebel's terms, to "taxonomize the world, provisionally sheltering it against ever-present threats of disorder and oblivion."²⁹

The sheer multiplicity of monsters and miracles attests to the fact that Prester John is, as a symbol of Christianity, strong enough to dissolve any Other that may threaten his hegemonic rule. John's ability not only to withstand but also, in Hegelian terms, to sublate (to abolish and preserve) the Other offers western Christianity a model of how to deal with its extimate Other, Islam—to strip it of its power while granting it its characteristic alterity. That is, Prester John's military policy valorizes humiliation and defeat ("*humiliare et debellare*") over the annihilation of threats, which, in turn, allows John to make this alterity work under the banner of Christianity without destroying its productive potential. It is here that the *Letter* reveals that even the idea of Islam as a Christian heresy—a formulation that the *Letter* patently rejects— may be less of an accurate way to establish the relationship between Christianity and Islam and more of a western fantasy hoping to redirect Islam's power simply by disavowing its alterity. By

²⁸ Much has been made recently about the medieval monster and what it signals for especially English identity. See especially the influential work of Jeffrey Cohen: *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999) and the edited collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. J. Cohen (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996).

²⁹ Michael Uebel, "Imperial Fetishism: Prester John Among the Natives" in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Cohen. New York: Palgrave, 2001, 262.

positing a model kingdom under which heretics, pagans, and monsters coexist the *Letter* offers a glimpse of a confidently universal Christendom that need not force assimilation or extermination in order to preserve its rule.

For although Judaism figures as the image of alterity for much of Christian history, the twelfth-century afforded the beginnings of an ideological shift. Latin Christians had over three centuries to be made aware of the rise of Umayyad Muslims, first over Catholic Visigoths, and then over most of Spain. The Visigoths who fled to the kingdom of the Franks during Charlemagne's rule must have imparted at least a vague sense of the military and ideological capabilities of Islam. Yet, because Spanish Muslim expansion tended to the west rather than the north, it seems that the imperial gaze of Islam was met initially by Latin Christians with little more than a cursory return glance³⁰ until the Reconquista garnered western attention. The First Crusade, inaugurated in 1096, allowed the first widespread public recognition of Islam as a viable and immediate threat, and with this recognition came a new drive to understand the theological force inspiring Islam.

As both R.W. Southern and Norman Daniel maintain, the twelfth-century Christian drive to understand Islam was carried out in almost exclusively anagogical

³⁰ Norman Daniel takes an even stronger stance, writing, "In those early days, at least outside Spain, it seems not to have been fully realised yet that Islam, unlike other heresies, and unlike the faiths of other invaders of Europe... had come to stay. The attacks on Italy, the raids along the whole Mediterranean littoral, the sack of St. Peter's under the walls of Rome, the arimes on the Garigliano, the sultanate of Bari, like the more durable base for inland raiding in Franc and into the Alps... seem to have stimulated no intellectual initiative." See *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1993), 16.

terms.³¹ The idea that Islam was a false Christianity and therefore could be subsumed under the auspices of heresy rather than embodying an independent and separate theology is perhaps best exemplified by the escalation of twelfth-century anti-hagiographies of Muhammad that depict the prophet as a heresiarch. The use of familiar tropes from the genre of hagiography to produce a new genre of heresiographies, coupled with the translation of the Qur'an into a highly stylized and elevated Latin that resembled a Christian holy book, speaks to the Latin Christian desire to situate Islam tropologically within the history of Christian revelation.³²

In the twelfth-century, Islam presented a strong threat to Christianity. Unlike Judaism, whose theological claims were familiar and therefore easily refutable and whose diasporic communities posed no realistic threat of political and theological ascendancy, Islam in the twelfth-century operated from the very center of the Christian world, Jerusalem. Islam's alterity registered sharply because, in a short time, many Latin Christians saw the Islamic threat transform from a distant and exotic problem into an immediate danger through the potential loss, once again, of the Holy Land.

As the transmission of information about Islam struggled to keep up with perceived territorial encroachments by Muslims, a vague outline began to form about what this new military player might represent. For many, Islam figured as the uncanny futural shadow of Christianity, intimately bound up with Christian belief and rule (in

³¹ See R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 34-56, and Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West*.

³² In the next section, I will elaborate on the ways that Latin Christians attempted to enclose Islam textually within its own Christian narratives.

Spain), and yet “unpredictable” and “immeasurable” as Southern puts it.³³ To absolutize this still largely unknown culture as, perhaps, “the culmination of all heresies” is, however, a way to undermine both Islam’s uncanniness and its unpredictability.

At the time of the *Letter*, one of Christianity’s most pressing concerns was to subjugate Islam, the representational antagonist to Christian subjectivity, with an ideological recourse steering towards the rich biblical tradition of Joshuan holy war. As Muslims began to conquer western lands, Latin Christians thus began increasingly to cast Islam into the Christian eschatological narrative as forebear of the Antichrist and precursor of the Apocalypse.³⁴ The *Letter of Prester John* provides the exemplar of an upstanding Christian king successfully reigning over the realm of the Other by assuring Latin audiences that no matter how expansive Islam seemed to get, Christians were fated to be God’s chosen people-- Islamic territories would always be enclosed in both east and west by Christian principalities. Prester John’s kingdom may, therefore, represent the west’s forecasted image of its other half— an affirmation of, on the one hand, what the Christian west is missing, and on the other, a futural image of what Christian life looks like after the west successfully and finally conquers their Islamic neighbor.

³³ R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 4.

³⁴ The identification of Islam with the Apocalypse actually has early origins of the history of Islam in medieval Christian writing. The anonymous Syrian *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, written in the late seventh century represented Muslim military expansion as part of the narrative of the last days. For more on this text and the parallel between Islam and the Christian Apocalypse more generally, see John Tolan, *Saracens* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 45-50; 135-170. Additionally, *Innocent III’s* justification of the Fourth Crusade in the early thirteenth century also relied heavily on identifying Islam with the beast of the Apocalypse. For Innocent, only the immediate demise of Islam could save the world from destruction.

In positing a Christian presence that geographically haunts the very borders of Islamic possibility, there perhaps also exists a covert admission that, conversely, Muslims occupy the center of the geographical body of Christianity. Having taken Jerusalem once (and primed to retake it twenty years after the *Letter*'s initial appearance), Islam constantly threatened to occupy the navel of Christendom. While the desire for Prester John indicates a drive for Latin Christians to overpower the Other by attempting to absorb it topographically, the legend's preoccupation with borders also suggests that Christian identity was not fully-sedimented at this time. In other words, the fervent regulation of the borders of Christian identity may have taken for granted an equally important need to secure the status of the more fundamental aspects of Christian identity. Even as the *Prester John Letter* offers hope to the ideal of a universal Christendom, it does so by admitting the either the lack or loss of a stable Christian identity, as evidenced by the heterogeneity of John's kingdom, including his own Nestorianism. Yet the *Letter* establishes a basic Christian ethos predicated on moral values (through John's actions) rather than rigorous doctrinal allegiances and, in doing so, valorizes shared core Christian values over the peripheral differences that end up undermining the possibility of consensus on a Christian ethos in the first place. Despite all the talk of heresy in the genres that help shape the *Letter*, the *Letter* itself never mentions the word. Instead, the descriptions of the monstrous in the *Letter* remind us that like Prester John, Christianity has seen it all; therefore, it can withstand it all. The *Letter* even proves the ideological stamina of Christianity by subtly incorporating Islamic influences into the construction of John's realm and ruling practices.

The *Letter* follows the description of the realm's creatures with a key phrase that invokes, for the first time, a trope familiar to the traditions of both Old Testament Israel and later the Islamic Paradise: "Our land flows with honey and abounds with milk" [*Terra nostra melle fluit lacte habundati*].³⁵ Whether or not this description was written intentionally to remind the audience of one of the few explicitly shared qualities between Biblical Israel and the Qur'anic Paradise, the image of rivers of milk and honey stresses the uncanny hybridity of Prester John: Christian, but a ruler of (mostly) pagan lands; ally and potential hero, but one whose presumably heterodox faith might, for some, gesture towards that most abhorrent of heresies, Islam. Here, the traditions of the Biblical Israel and the Qur'anic Paradise converge, and ascribe to John's realm a disjointed temporality that appears to simultaneously represent the past and future, respectively. Consequently, the present becomes a no-place, a territory that begs for Christian presence and reclamation very much akin to the coterminous drive to fully inhabit Christian identity again by retaking Jerusalem once and for all.

The description of the rivers of milk and honey opens a brief foray into the paradisaal elements of John's kingdom itself, or rather, in one particular part of John's kingdom [*In aliqua terra nostra*]. This area is devoid of any venomous creature, contains magical

³⁵ See, for example, Exodus 3:7-9 describing the fertility of Israel and Surah 47:15, describing that paradisaal Islamic garden. The rivers of milk and honey also recall the stories of the gardens built by the famed Old Man of the Mountain. In that tradition, the Old Man builds ornate palaces surrounded by gardens with fountains of honey, milk, wine, and water. For more on the Islamic Gardens and the Islamic conception of Paradise, see Nerina Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire: Heaven and Hell in Islamic Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

plants, and is littered with precious gemstones—each of these elements figure prominently in conceptions of the Islamic Paradise.³⁶ Specifically, the *Letter*'s claim that there are neither venomous serpents nor scorpions directly evokes the imagery used in popular Islamic narratives describing the perils of the grave for those who remain unbelieving.³⁷ The fountain of youth mentioned in the *Letter* keeps its users perpetually thirty-two years old: in at least one description of the Islamic Paradise, the male inhabitants likewise remain permanently in their thirties.³⁸ That this pseudo-paradise is only one fantastic location among many in John's realm underscores the strategy of rhetorically conveying the immense topographical span of the world by condensing and encapsulating vastness through John's kingdom. In doing this, the *Letter* reifies the *topos* of enclosure as a viable expression of power: the act of Christianizing the imaginative

³⁶ "Venenata animalia non possunt habitare in eo loco nec aliquos laedere. Inter paganos per quandam provinciam nostram transit fluvius, qui vocature Ydonus. Fluvius ist de paradiso progrediens expandit sinus suos per universam provinciam illam diversis meatibus, et ibi inveniuntur naturales lapides, smaragdi, sphiri, earbundculi, topazzii, crisoliti, onichini, berilli, ametisti, sardii, et plures preciosi lapides" (Zarncke, 912). For a description of the most important features of the landscape of Islamic Paradise, see Rustomji's chapter "Otherworldly Landscapes and Earthly Realities" in *The Garden and the Fire*, 63-76. Additionally, although the presence of gemstones also popularly figure into the New Jerusalem as foretold in the *Book of Revelation*, the way in which they occur naturally in the general landscape accords better with Islamic conceptions of Paradise, rather than the Christian. According to *Revelation*, the gems are built into the foundation of the city walls (21:18-21). John's land conspicuously lacks the borders that New Jerusalem so intently foregrounds. The realm of the *Letter* also lacks the traditional Christian paradisaic mainstays so briefly outlined in Revelation 21 and 22 such as the tree of life, gates, lack of sun/moon, and general the presence of a Jesus/Lord/Lamb figure. In fact, the *Letter* is explicit in its admission that John's land, while near the "Paradise from which Adam was driven out," is not in fact that locale. The realm *does* however include elements seemingly unique to Islamic paradise, as popular conceived in Assassin legend, including beautiful women, strange creatures, abundant food, silk, a military presence, and a clear hierarchy.

³⁷ See Jane Smith and Ybonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1981), 38.

³⁸ See Marie-Rose Séguy, *The Miraculous Journey of Mahomet [Mirâj Nâmeh]* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), 41

spaces of alterity (the east) implies that these othered spaces are not to be feared but rather recognized as mere cogs in the Christian cosmological machine.

Throughout the *Letter*, the author mentions the fantastic sites found in John's land ostensibly in the interest of clarifying the realm's topography. These sites include, beside the pseudo-paradise, the shrine of St. Thomas, the Tower of Babel, Mount Olympus, the tomb of the Old Testament prophet Daniel, the fountain of youth, and the dwelling places of the ten tribes of Jews, the Amazons, and the Brahmans, among others. The *Letter's* presentation of the topography of Prester John's kingdom *via* notable touchstones such as these accords well with the way that medieval *mappae mundi* indicate and plot topographical relationships through stories and legends inserted on a map. But it is one thing to say that the *Letter* contextualizes the place of Prester John via reference to well-known geographical markers in the medieval imagination, and quite another to realize that Prester John does not merely exist among these markers, but rules over them: "if you can count the stars in heaven, if you can count all the sands of the desert, you can calculate the extent of my kingdom."³⁹

While the descriptions of John's kingdom gesture at times toward the Islamic conception of paradise, the description of the famed panoptic mirror sitting atop John's Christian kingdom forms the most overt challenge to popular Islamic lore. Traditions about the Old Man of the Mountain, which infiltrated the west during the period of the Crusades (about ten years before the appearance of the Prester John *Letter*), and later

³⁹ "*Si potes dinumerare stellas caeli et harenam maris, dinumera et dominium nostrum et potestatem nostram*" (Zarncke, 924).

popularly in Marco Polo's *Travels*, tell of a mysterious Muslim leader (the Arabic title is Sheikh al Jebal) who had reportedly built a luxurious garden nestled between two mountains somewhere east of Outremer. The Old Man is reputed to have tried building a paradise on earth by stacking one beautiful garden on top of another in an immense and highly geometrical manner. At the top of the gardens, the Old Man and his followers reveled in the finest food and drink and had all of their carnal desires satiated by innumerate beautiful female companions. Within this palace, the Old Man trained his devotees, known to the West as Assassins, to kill his enemies and, in return, he promised reentrance into his paradisaal palace once their missions were accomplished.⁴⁰

If at times Prester John's apparent omnipotence connotes a religious inclusivity that a twelfth-century Latin Christianity might find uncomfortable, several passages in the *Letter* abate such unease. Where John's realm seems to hint at ideas of the Islamic Paradise early in the *Letter*, by the middle of the text those influences become thoroughly Christianized. Approximately halfway through the *Letter*, the description turns to a detailed account of Prester John's palace. The author takes extensive care to describe the lavish exterior and interior of the palace, concentrating largely on its adornment with gems and precious metals. John's bedchamber is as "marvelously gilded and ornamented with all kinds of stones," as any reader would have anticipated, but these stones carry more than merely aesthetic value. John's bed is lined with sapphire, "on account of the stone's virtue in chastity" [*Lectus noster est de sapphiro propter virtutem castitatis*], an

⁴⁰ Rustomji relates that in the 1120's the Fatimid caliph al-Amir invented for these followers the name *hashishiyya*, or "those who take hashish" which became known to Europe, once westernized, as "Assassins" (xiii).

observation that legitimizes John's pious title as well as distancing him from the implication of sensual indulgence that the Islamic Paradise carried for medieval Christians.⁴¹

Prester John piously withstands the luxurious pleasures in which other Oriental kings, like his Islamic counterparts, are encouraged to indulge. Despite the fact that "we have the most beautiful women," the *Letter* points out that wives come to their husbands only four times a year and strictly for procreative purposes. Moreover, while John's court dines, the amethyst columns that support the giant dining table secures the fact that "no one sitting at the table [will] become inebriated" [*Huius lapidis ertus neminem sedentem ad mensam permittit inebriari*].⁴² Here is a testament to both the strength and merit of Christianity. Although Prester John's kingdom contains many of the same elements as the Islamic Paradise, John is, along with the members of his kingdom, able to remain chaste and indifferent to the pressures of the material world. Assuming the posture of abstinence in the face of temptation, John and his constituents are rendered superior to Muslims who were thought to be encouraged to indulge in such sensualities upon reaching the Islamic paradise.

But the Prester John legend is not only a response but also an attempt to reintegrate such a paradise within a Christianized ethical paradigm. The *Letter* states that "before the doors of our palace... is a mirror of very great size" [*Ante fores palatii nostri iuxta locum, ubi pugnantes in duello cogonizant, est speculum praeelsae magnitudinis*],

⁴¹ Here I am indebted to Geraldine Heng's reading of the Prester John *Letter* in a lecture entitled "Sex, Lies, and Paradise: the Assassins, Prester John, and the Fabulation of Civilizational Identities."

⁴² *Ibid.*, 918.

which is supported by a single column. This column is itself supported by a base erected in a manner recalling the famed gardens of the Old Man in the Mountain: “Above this column is set a base, upon the base are two columns, above which is another base and upon which are eight columns, above which another base and up one which are sixteen columns,” et cetera.⁴³ The base is built in a similar geometric style as the gardens, that is, by stacking identical structures of decreasing size on top of one another, although in this case the base is inverted.

Instead of a giant orgy at the top of this geometric structure, there appears a giant magical mirror. In what seems more than a coincidence, this magical mirror resting atop such a large structure is guarded by 12,000 soldiers both day and night—the same number as the number of angels that guard the top of the ladder leading into the Afterworld in stories of Muhammad’s Ascension.⁴⁴ Here, it seems that the *Letter* is providing both a parallel and a complement to one of the foundational stories guaranteeing an Islamic Paradise. By way of this mirror, Prester John oversees the doings of the entire world, and, more than that, the mirror shows all the things that *will* occur in the future, allowing John to track the machinations of presumed enemies of Christianity everywhere by means of a magic trick that surely appealed to Crusaders forever be

⁴³ “*Super ipsam vero basis acens, super basim columpnae duae, super quas item alia basis et super ipsam quatour columpnae, super quas item alia basis et super ipsam VIII columpnae, super quas item alia basis et super ipsam columpnae XVI*” (Zarncke, 919).

⁴⁴ See Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq’s Birat Rasul Allah*, trans. A. Guillaume. (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 184. The number 12,000 also has significance in Christian numerology, most significantly as the number of stadia of the Holy City (length, width and height) of the new Jerusalem. (Rev 21,16). The number also signifies the number of people who will be saved from each of the twelve tribes of Jews (Rev 7:3-8). While this number has clear significance in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition, the description of 12,000 bodies situated at a great height recalls the Islamic use of the number more directly than it does either Christian or Jewish uses of the number.

waiting on their leaders, whether real (Frederick II) or imagined (Prester John). In other words, while Muslims utilize their architectural genius for what Christians consider hedonistic pleasures, John, the pious Christian, acts as custodian of Christianity's safety, unaffected by the lure of material pleasure, and achieves in earthly life what Islam can only guarantee in the afterlife.

Moreover, according to Slessarev, the omnipresent magical mirror atop John's palace has an Islamic precedent in early Persian literature.⁴⁵ The reappropriation of a Muslim trope into a space for universal Christianity that nevertheless retains the mark of an Islamic cultural artifact at its core, accords well with Žižek's assertion that "all 'culture' is in a way a reaction-formation, an attempt to limit, canalize... [a] radical antagonism through which man cuts his umbilical cord with nature."⁴⁶ Put in terms of the Prester John legend and Holy War, this antagonistic instinct is transformed into an ideological impulse to deny the existence of a threatening Islam specifically while fighting against Islamic threat. Latin Christians appropriated their understanding of Islam into the repository of the Christian Imaginary, rendering the repressed Islamic alterity intelligible while also arranging this new understanding into a semi-coherent fantasy. What Prester John's *Letter* allows then, is the guarantee that however expansive Islam may become, it will never replace or even threaten the ideological and religious hegemony that comprised the core of Christianity—even if Prester John was, as

⁴⁵ Slessarev attributes the magic mirror to Arabic tales of sorcery and as a well known trope in Persian literature, extending especially to the account of Eldad had-Dani (49-50). Thus we have a Muslim origin at the heart of this panoptical surveillance.

⁴⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2009), xxviii.

presumed, heretically Nestorian. John's Nestorianism, which will be addressed later, became another symptom of his hybridity, but was not unattended to during the rise of his legend in the twelfth-century.⁴⁷

Abstaining from avarice and only copulating for procreation, Prester John effectively manages the desire for the exotic while wholly maintaining the aggressive imperial drive to conquer foreign lands without allowing their opulence to conquer himself. Prester John thus refigures the excessive character of Christianity as an asset to its imperial ambitions rather than a hindrance. Forcing all of Latin Christendom to wait for his arrival, the Prester John legend also recathects the anxiety about the Christian future from the fear of Muslim ascendancy to the anticipation of the sovereign meant to usher in an age of universal Christian rule. The fictitious letter from Prester John does not merely disguise a historical truth, such as Mongol military expansion, but perhaps more significantly betrays a hyperreal knowledge—that in order to realize the amalgamated desire to confine, sublate, and thus dissolve the uncanny threat posed by Islam, the *societas Christiana* must accept and handle its own excesses, emphasizing a shared center rather than a contested periphery, if a truly universal Christendom was to dictate the narrative of history to come.

⁴⁷ Pope Alexander III sent envoys to Prester John, along with a response to his *Letter* in 1177, imploring John to become educated in the Latin Catholic faith.

Uncanny Doubles: St. Thomas/Edessa; Muhammad/Nestorius

While the Prester John legend reveals the Latin Christian desire to enclose Islam topographically, linguistically, and militaristically, there has not yet been an adequate explanation of why the projected fantasy of the eastern Christian ruler had to contain so many of the exotic elements often attributed to Islam, the enemy of its presumed audience. If, in fact, the legend served merely to absorb the ideological threat of Islam, why not make Prester John the paragon of doctrinal Christian virtue? If the *Letter* was intended to bolster crusader morale, why attribute theological arrogance to John and why imbue his kingdom with some of the same qualities (polygamy, Nestorianism, monstrosity) that Latin Christendom would for centuries combat? Yes, the *Letter* proves that John was able to withstand the temptations of the east and ultimately prove a powerful and devout Christian sovereign, but scholarship on Prester John still lacks an adequate interpretation for the *Letter's* more puzzling details.

Michael Uebel, one of few scholars to theorize the legend, positions John's kingdom as an intermediary between the Christian West and Muslim culture to help dissolve anxiety over Islamic alterity.⁴⁸ Admittedly, Prester John's Christianized otherness afforded western Christians some security about their own identities, but an emphasis on mediation seems to ignore the geographic detail of the *Letter* and the military influence of the Prester John legend. If Prester John only offered Latin Christians

⁴⁸ See especially his *Ecstatic Transformation* as well as "Unthinking the Monster: Twelfth-century Responses to Saracen Alterity" in *Monster Theory*, ed. Jeffrey Cohen (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1996), 264-291.

a palette from which to resolve anxieties about otherness and identity, the legend would not have factored so powerfully into crusading decisions. My analysis of the *Letter* thus far has been purposefully descriptive: I showed how parts of the *Letter* suggested a dialogue between Prester John's kingdom and Islam that reclaimed exoticism for Christianity, but I did not provide reasons for the *Letter's* strategy of reclamation. Through an analysis of a series of doubles catalyzed by Prester John's dual role as arbiter of the foreign and redeemer of the familiar, I hope to offer an explanation for the Prester John *Letter* that addresses both its Christian familiarity and exotic otherness.

As mentioned earlier, most versions of the *Legend* in some way orient Prester John's kingdom around the site of the tomb of St. Thomas, hinting at a Christian precedent for the origin of John's legend.⁴⁹ According to Slessarev, the legendary elements that shape the stories of Prester John and St. Thomas forge a critically overlooked connection between the two Christian figures.⁵⁰ Through the figure 'Patriarch John' in an anonymous twelfth-century tract, *De adventu patriarchae Indorum ad Urbem sub Calixto papa secundo* [On the arrival of the Patriarch of the Indians to Rome under Pope Calixtus II], Slessarev finds an analogue and predecessor of the Prester. Within *de Adventu*, Patriarch John, hailing from India, travels to the Pope in 1122 and gives an account of the vast wealth and power of Christians who guarded the shrine

⁴⁹ On the medieval legends of St. Thomas, Michael Uebel writes that these texts "record an instance of ritualized fetishism, whose basic elements provided source material for the descriptions of the saint's festival in at least one Latin version of the [Prester John] *Letter* (the Hildesheim manuscript), several French versions, and the narrative of Elyseus (1185)." For Uebel's theoretical analysis on the connection between Prester John, St. Thomas, and the fetish, see "The Pathogenesis of Medieval History," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44 (2002): 47-65, 55

⁵⁰ Slessarev, 9.

of St. Thomas and then describes the miracles that St. Thomas performed in the surrounding area.⁵¹

Most Latin Christians would not have been very familiar with the tradition of St. Thomas, as the *Acts* were Syrian in origin, and, although later translated into Latin, they did not have much of a western readership. Thomas was long considered a pioneer of eastern Christianity, which for many western Christians, connoted heresy, but Thomas was hardly a figure traditionally brought up in western discussions of heresy. In fact, it was not until the era of Prester John that popular Latin legends about St. Thomas began circulating in the West. A contemporaneous text, a letter written by Odo of Rheims, abbot of St. Remy, addressed to a Count Thomas, narrates a similar version of the miracles of St. Thomas in India. The only substantial difference between the details of *De adventu* and Odo's letter is that in Odo's version John is an archbishop, and that he came to Constantinople to request a replacement for the prince of Hulna, who had recently died. Of course, Byzantine emperors at this time had no discernible influence on Indian politics, but as the *Letter*'s address indicates, these vaguely eastern locales may have been imagined to be in frequent dialogue with each other, if only for their shared deviance from western Christian doctrines. There were, of course, reputed Christian communities in India in the twelfth-century and, as Marco Polo later observes, there existed an Indian Christian community in Mailapur devoted to St. Thomas.⁵² Christian

⁵¹ Ibid., 10. The text of *De adventu* is edited by Zarncke in the collection of Prester John related texts, 837-846.

⁵² Slessarev mentions this passage from Marco Polo (16). For the passage itself, see Henry Yule and Henri Cordier, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, vol. 2, 3rd ed. (London: John Murray, 1921-26), 353-359.

tradition situates Thomas as the Apostle whom Jesus sent to India, and it is safe to say that Thomas can be considered a forebear of eastern Christianity.

The most skeptical of the Apostles, Thomas provides John (and India) with a Christian precedent while subtly bestowing upon John's legend an aura of believability, since the once-doubting Thomas was also known as "Thomas the believer." With a base population of Christians and a reliable method of conversion, the anonymous *De adventu* depicts India as a veritable production site for Christianity, albeit of an unfamiliar, possibly heretical variety. However, even if Thomas and his followers cannot properly be recruited as allies for the Latin west, these texts firmly maintain that these eastern Christian communities were nonetheless enemies of all non-Christians, which obviously included Muslims. Moreover, in both versions of the story, India's leader, Patriarch John, who recalls Prester John in name and intent, goes to Rome in order to prove his commitment to a global *societas Christiana* by actively advocating for the reunification of Eastern and Western Churches. This text therefore reinforces a major tenet of the *Letter* in that Thomas and Prester John represented an exotic east that rejected Islam theologically and, on John's side, offered ample opposition to Islam militarily, all in the hopes of producing a more inclusive Christian identity.

For eastern Christians, a parallel but alternate history of St. Thomas attested similar miracles to those of *de Adventu* but situated them in a different locale—one decidedly on the mind of many twelfth-century Latin Christians. A twelfth-century account of India written by the monk Elysaeus, influenced in part by the Prester John *Letter*, situates the miracles of St. Thomas on a mountain just outside of recently lost

Crusader county of Edessa.⁵³ This tradition was not a twelfth-century invention, however. The Latin version of the *Acts of Thomas*, which evolved into two more popular treatises, *De miraculis Beati Thomae* and the *Passio Sancti Thomae*, both explicitly identify the city of Edessa as the final burial place of Thomas.⁵⁴ The original third-century Syrian *Acts of Thomas* supports both locations.⁵⁵ It was even thought that Thomas rested simultaneously in Edessa and India.⁵⁶ The topographical confusion over the resting place of St. Thomas and the location of Prester John appears to intersect at specific and intriguing places, suggesting that the relationship between the two figures extends beyond their shared faith.

Not only were Edessa and India competing for the heritage of St. Thomas, they also appear to be competing for spiritual superiority and protection. Yet, Slessarev does not detect the curiously coincidental relationship between the *Letter's* crusading rhetoric, St. Thomas' alternate resting place in the crusader state Edessa, and the fall of crusader

⁵³ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁵ See Albertus F.J. Klijn, ed. *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003), 153-154. Initially, the text states "they brought goodly garments and many linen cloths, and buried Judas in the sepulcher in which the ancient kings were buried." Later, however, when certain villagers go to Thomas' tomb, the text claims "he did not find the bones, for one of the brethren had taken them away secretly and conveyed them to the West" (153). Although significant as a singular detail in the St. Thomas tradition, when considering the text of the *Acts* as a whole, this duality is simply another device to cement the traditional pairing of Thomas with Jesus. This theme is supported through the *Acts* and will be looked at more thoroughly later in this section.

⁵⁶ Nicolaus Nilles, *Kalendarium manual utriusque ecclesiae orientalis et occidentalis*, Vol. 1 (Oeniponte :Innsbruck, 1896), 297-298)

Edessa to the Muslims in 1144 (where the Christians lost an estimated 120,000 men).⁵⁷ Thus, by an extraordinary coincidence, Eusebius' 'Presbyter John' was of Edessa, St. Thomas was killed and buried in India although his body was brought to Edessa, and the *Letter of Prester John* materialized only a year after the crusaders' loss of Edessa, the first established Crusader state. Edessa was regarded as one of the chief Christian cities at the time, not only for its Christian population, but also for its strategic location as a Christian gateway to the East. Jerusalem might be the center of the Christian world, but Edessa, as the first crusader state to be established and also the first to be lost, figures as the first success in the expansion of the limits of a Latin Christian empire. Their textual relation suggests that the reports of the events within these locales might have been circulating more closely than their geographies might otherwise indicate.

Edessa was an important center of Syrian culture, and Thomas was historically considered the favorite disciple among Syrian Christians. He was often referred to as the "twin of Christ" because of a tradition in which Thomas was sometimes transfigured into Jesus.⁵⁸ In the text of the Syrian *Acts*, Thomas often transforms briefly into Jesus and *vice versa*, although, of course, the text explicitly states that Thomas was not Christ.⁵⁹ In

⁵⁷ In late 1144, Imad-ad-Din Zengi, the governor of Mosul and Aleppo, led an army against an unsuspecting Edessa and thoroughly sacked and conquered the city within a month, leaving western Christians without its most northeastern defense.

⁵⁸ Klijn, 37.

⁵⁹ Thomas and Jesus stand in for one another in at least four instances in the *Acts*. In the first instance, Thomas visits a young bride-to-be when he suddenly transforms into Jesus, who communicates to the young couple the importance of chastity. "I am not Judas," Jesus says, "but I am the brother of Judas" (70). The second instance of transfiguration reverses the expected roles: a woman is resurrected and anticipates the presence of Jesus when she is brought back to life, but instead only sees Thomas and asks,

terms of the Prester John legend, John began to represent for western Christianity what Thomas represented for Christ. Both Thomas and Prester John offer the west a more eastern, exotic, and yet uncannily familiar counterpart to traditional doctrine. As collectors of Christian alterity, these figures provided a neat repository into which the west could project outward the inassimilable excesses (i.e. heresies) outlying a fully realized western Christian identity.

In considering Prester John's relation to the Apostle Thomas, it is particularly revealing that the tradition of the tomb of St. Thomas directly mirrors the tradition of Muhammad's tomb. If the legend of Prester John indeed represented the Latin west's defensive projection of a domesticated Islamic alterity, it is appropriate that John's kingdom would be fitted with the elaborate tomb of a Christian apostle whose miracles could rival those of Islam's most revered figure. Despite the lack of an obvious intertextual link between the two figures, western authors of the twelfth-century invented a tradition that had no literary precedent, constructing separate legends that the tombs of Muhammad and St. Thomas's floated in mid-air. Interestingly, in both traditions, the tomb achieves the floating effect as neither an effect of magic nor inherent sanctity— the strange phenomenon is simply the result of strategically placed magnets. These details belonged to the larger category of false miracles, or *ficti religio*, a standard tropological device in anti-hagiography, a genre whose popularity peaked in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

"I pray thee, sire, where is the other, who was with me, who did not let me remain in the place which I saw, but gave me over to thee?" (94).

The Crusades inaugurated a trend in Latin Christian writing about Muhammad, in which fantastic exaggerations of aspects of the prophet's life were increasingly frequent, especially in the twelfth-century.⁶⁰ One such invention of these Latin writers was the mythicization of Muhammad's tomb. Embrico of Mainz' twelfth-century *Vita Mahumeti*, the first coherent Latin Christian response to Islam, inaugurated the tradition of Muhammad's tomb being suspended in mid-air by magnets — described in almost exactly the same terms as the tradition of Thomas' floating tomb.

Other twelfth-century portraits of Muhammad, including the *Chanson d'Antioche* and Gautier de Compiègne's *De otia Machometi* offer similar descriptions of Muhammad's tomb, envisioned ostensibly in order to showcase the way in which Muhammad feigned piety and miracles in order to assure adherents of his sanctity.⁶¹ During the Middle Ages, the main church in Edessa, which would have probably held the tomb of St. Thomas, was considered to be one of the Muslim wonders of the world, a fact of which contemporary western Christians were aware.⁶² This is not to say that Muslims were cognizant of either tomb's tradition, as these stories were entirely Latin Christian inventions. Yet, western Christians seem to implicitly recognize a connection between the eastern Christians' adoration of the Apostle Thomas and the Muslims' adulation of their prophet Muhammad.

⁶⁰ See the chapter "Muhammad, Heresiarch (Twelfth Century)" in *Saracens*, 135-170.

⁶¹ *Saracens*, 121.

⁶² See Alexander Vasilev, "The Life of St. Theodore of Edessa," *Byzantion* 16 (1944), 165-225, 180.

If Muhammad's tomb mirrored the Christians' Jerusalem, as the historian John Tolan contends, it is also true that the tomb shared a relation with Thomas. Neither Tolan nor Slessarev, who discuss the traditions of Muhammad's tomb, identify its connection with traditions of St. Thomas. However, Uebel concentrates on the fetishistic aspects of their shared tradition and the way this Christian representation aligns with Derrida's concept of "originary delay."⁶³ Uebel convincingly elaborates a dialectical tension between the Muslim Other and the Latin Christian self, but it appears that St. Thomas, like Prester John, offers something different from an intermediary or synthesis to check the anxieties about acknowledging an Islamo-Christian relation.

The stories of Muhammad's resting place, which described his tomb as a pilgrimage destination akin to Christian Jerusalem, represent an additional structural relation where Islam is figured as Christian Other, as "a sort of mirror image of the crusaders' Jerusalem, an anti-Jerusalem."⁶⁴ Christianized additions to the stories of Muhammad's tomb centralized the acknowledged similarities between Christianity and Islam while also illustrating the Christian desire to understand otherness purely in the structural terms of the self. Not only was Muhammad's tomb a parallel holy destination for the Muslim Other, Muhammad himself was figured in the Christian imagination as both literally Antichrist and preeminent heresiarch. By the late eleventh century, the old accusations that Muslims were pagans had faded, and Islam became increasingly correlated with Latin Christendom's newfound preoccupation with heresy and reform.

⁶³ "The Pathogenesis of Medieval History," 58.

⁶⁴ *Saracens*, 144.

Whereas Latin Christians once considered Muhammad as the leader of a pagan cult, they now saw in the prophet the feigned holiness of a heresiarch of whom the Book of Revelation foretold—he who would usher in the Antichrist, and with it, the Apocalypse. The falsely miraculous tomb depicted in Embrico of Mainz’s *Vita Mahumeti* engages in a broader strategy of depicting Muhammad as “the supreme anti-saint” by reversing the standard literary tropes of the genre of hagiography.⁶⁵ The *Vita* was even written in leonine hexameters, the standard format for most Latin hagiographies.

If Muhammad’s tomb serves as an anti-Jerusalem and Thomas’ tomb is a response to the anti-Jerusalem, Thomas (and Prester John) do not represent an idealized Christianity, a fully realized earthly paradise but, rather, constitute a strategy to displace the proximity between Islam and Christianity: an anti-anti-Jerusalem. The idea of an “Other of the Other” provides a way to address an alterity that is externalized—‘Muslims are unlike us Latin Christians, and what you lack, we have—your identity is dependent on ours, we are the fixed entity—it is Prester John who shares those strange customs with you, and he is going to destroy you and renounce his difference in order to assimilate to our fully-constructed identity.’ By this logic, Prester John represents a way to speak about difference, an anchoring point, without acknowledging the inherent alterity in Latin Christian identity.

⁶⁵ Other hagiographical tropes employed by Embrico include animals submitting to the authority of Muhammad, prophetic powers, miracles performed, and levitation, all of which, when enacted by Muhammad, are seen as nothing more than clever tricks and thus perversions of actual saintly piety. Embrico does not even allow Muhammad to possess the cleverness necessary to fool the Christians: it is in fact a corrupt Christian, called Magus, who orchestrates these deceptions (a clear allusion to Simon Magus, the “spiritual father of heresy”). See Tolan’s chapter “Antihagiography: Embrico of Mainz’ *Vita Mahumeti*” in *Sons of Ishmael*, 1-18. Tolan also touches on the *Vita* in the chapter “Muhammad, Heresiarch” in *Saracens*, 135-170.

Although I discussed the *Letter*'s reactions to Islam in an early section of this essay, they are worth revisiting for the purpose of comparing the *Letter*'s concerns with those of the twelfth-century heresiographies. According to Tolan, a popular theme of biographies of Muhammad was to convey the prophet's promotion of sensual indulgence. As popularly conceived in the Qur'anic tradition "[t]he senses are not the snares of temptation; they are the means of our participation in God's glorious creation," an enticement that doctrinal Christianity expressly warned against.⁶⁶ In the *Letter*, Prester John rules over a kingdom loaded with opportunities for indulgence, while he, of course, abstains in the name of Christian piety. Muhammad's numerous wives became a point of contention for Christians in their twelfth-century writings on Islam, as he was known to have had as many as nine wives at once, an exception allowed him by the Qur'an (33:50), which restricts other men to four. The *Letter*'s response to polygamy is telling.

The text of the *Letter* implies that while Prester John only has sex four times a year and for strictly procreative purposes, he still has multiple wives: [*"Mulieres speciosissimas habemus, sed non accedunt ad nos nisi casu procreandorum filiorum quarter in anno, et sic a nobis sanctificateae, ut Bersabee a David, redit unaquaeque ad locum suum"*].⁶⁷ The curious addition at the end, "*ut Bersabee a David*" betrays one of a few subtle (yet overt) criticisms of Prester John embedded in the *Letter* by its author.

That John himself sanctifies his couplings as Bathsheba was sanctified by David should

⁶⁶ *Saracens*, 24.

⁶⁷ Zarncke, 918. The English: "We have the most beautiful women, but they do not come to use except four times a year for the purpose of precreating children, and thus sanctified by us, as Bathsheba by David, each one returns to her place" (Uebel, 158).

recall for western Christians the story in 2 Samuel 11 about David seducing and impregnating an already-married Bathsheba, whose child, punished by God, died a few days after being born. The text of the *Letter* suggests that John's couplings, while perhaps driven by an austere piety, resonate nonetheless as infelicitous undertakings. This remark reveals a fear that the Christian kingdom of Prester John might actually represent a territory that continuously produces soldiers of God that are nonetheless left unsanctified by the deity they intend to serve. Far from a facilely imagined Christian utopia, John's kingdom here maps on to the Latin Christian consequential unease of being left open to the pressures of heterogenic cultural influence.

The common attribution of Nestorianism to Prester John furthers an imagined dialectic between Prester John's kingdom and Islam. Prester John's reputed unorthodox faith was certainly a problem for at least some twelfth-century Christians, as evidenced by Pope Alexander III's decision to send an envoy to Prester John in order to educate him on the proper practices of Catholicism in 1177. Additionally, the omnipresent Edessa was not only the resting place of St. Thomas and the site of a recent Muslim takeover. Edessa had also been historically considered a valuable bed of Nestorianism ever since the School of Edessa's professed support of Nestorius in the fifth century. Thus it should come as no surprise that Nestorianism and Islam are grouped together in several western Christian texts. In one of the twelfth-century heresiographies of Muhammad, Adelphus' *Vita machometi*, as Tolan describes it, the author (Adelphus?) describes Muhammad as

“the Nestorius of the Agarenes” and has him marry the Queen of Babylon.⁶⁸ Tolan remarks that “all four authors [of twelfth-century Latin biographies of Muhammad] insist on the spiritual heritage of Muhammad: while the prophet himself claims affinity to Moses and Christ, the authors instead profess Muhammad’s solidarity with the great heresiarchs of old, in particular Arius and Nestorius.”⁶⁹

Clearly, by the twelfth-century there was a well-established literary precedent for linking Muslims and Nestorians together as two of Latin Christendom’s more problematic groups of heretics. This belief was probably supplemented by the fact that along with ‘Tartars’ [Mongols], Nestorians and Muslims were the two most widely mentioned groups in travel narratives authored by Latin Christians’ travels to the East. In Odoric of Pordenone’s *Relatio*, an eastern travel account that later influenced Mandeville, the Franciscan narrator even conflates the faiths of Nestorians and Muslims during a disputation in the well-known episode of the martyrdom of four Franciscan friars.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *Saracens*, 138. Although the passage Tolan relates the two figures as heresiarchs, the text also indicates a possible textual relation between Nestorians and Muslims: “*rituris Agarenis, quam hactenus servant, Nestorius et Machometa in commune scriptitarunt. Quode iste non poterat per heresim, ille adiecit per mathesin.*” For the original Latin text, see B. Bischoff, ed. “Ein Leben Mohammeds (Adelphus?) (Zwölftes Jahrhundert),” in *Anecdota Novissima: Texte des vierten bis sechzenten Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart : A. Hiersemann, 1984) , 106-122 (Tolan references p. 122 while I emphasize p. 120). Additionally, “Agarenes” refers to Hagar, mother of Ishmael, and along with Saracens (those not from Sarah), and Ishmaelites (those descending from Ishmael) forms the primary descriptive triad (from the perspective of the Latin West) for Muslims in the Middle Ages.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 138, 144.

⁷⁰ See Odoric of Pordenone, *The Travels of Friar Odoric*, trans. Sir Henry Yule (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 80-83. In this episode, four Franciscan friars are staying in a Nestorian community and witness a Nestorian man beating his wife, and after appearing at the court of the *Cadi* [“in their tongue their bishop”], the Cadi asks them to join him in a dispute about religion. The two points that the friars dwell on are the divinity of Christ and the perfidy of Muhammad, addressing both the dyophysitism of Nestorians and the false belief in Muhammad in one fell swoop. In referring to this episode in the introduction to the text, Paolo Chiesa maintains that “[Odoric’s] condemnation appears to

Thus, over time, Latin Europe's preoccupation with these two heresies, Nestorianism and Islam, converged asymptotically in the Latin Christian Imaginary, reinforcing the separate, but related intimate relationship developing between a Nestorian Prester John and Islam. A survey of traditions in which Muhammad and Nestorius, Islam and Nestorianism, are paired, shows that it is hardly novel for a text to couple the twin heresies of Nestorianism and Islam, nor is there anything new in pitting the Nestorian against the Muslim, as attested by the hugely popular *Risâlat al-Kindî*.⁷¹ What does seem to be original is the *Letter's* assumption that one heretical sect can be counted on to vanquish the other and subsequently to reunite with its Latin Christian brethren—a fantastic projection, to be sure.

Given the twelfth-century textual relationship forged between the Apostle Thomas and Islam (through Muhammad) and the historical association between Thomas and Nestorianism (through Edessa), the bond between the Apostle and Prester John is worth revisiting. As pseudo-mythical figures lodged within the experiential gap between the human and divine, Thomas and John offered their constituent audiences a bridge between the knowable human and unknowable deity and produced a limit case from which God's intent might be discerned. Yet, their textual traditions and the realities they

have fallen on the historical enemies of Catholicism: the Muslims (or 'Saracens') and the Nestorian Christians" (15).

⁷¹The *Risâlat al-Kindî*, written in Arabic by a Christian in Spain records a fictional exchange of letters, a *disputatio* between a Nestorian Christian and Muslim, both members of the 'Abassid court. Although presumably composed in Spain in the ninth century, the Latin translation of this polemical text became the most popularly read tract against Muslims in all of Latin Christendom. Strangely, the Christian apologist argues that Muhammad composed the Qur'an with the help of Sergius (also called Nestorius), despite the pro-Christian arguments voiced by a Nestorian.

produced ultimately privileged promise over results (Thomas was not Jesus and Prester John never shows up). Their perpetual indeterminacy further evidenced by the refusal to fix a location for John's kingdom or for Thomas' tomb, sustained the hope that John or Thomas might fulfill their potential as God's cipher. By remaining untraceable on the time-space grid of epistemological possibility, Thomas and John evade their fundamental mortality through a life that, like the divine, must necessarily remain purely conjectural. Even as their crucial absences threaten to (re)inscribe the ultimate lack attendant to their (and our) mortality, their untraceability prolongs opportunities for the transcendence promised by Christian eschatology (when Thomas is united with and through Jesus and Prester John unites Christendom).

Still, western Christians were only as likely to acknowledge their dependence on Prester John as they would be to accept Syrian Christian belief that St. Thomas was Jesus' favorite disciple—that is, not likely at all. The influence of Prester John on military decisions during the Fifth Crusade was perhaps anomalous but was also symptomatic of the underlying persistence and the illogical resilience of a belief in earthly transcendence. Prester John merely provided a vessel through which a long-held Christian desire might materialize. Logically, twelfth-century Christians would associate alterity of a Christian kind meant heresy, so even if Prester John did embody the twin Other of Latin Christianity, Latin Christians would be hard put to embrace him. Deliberately acceding to John's heterodoxy would force Latin Christians to recognize the functional legitimacy of a Christian alterity that the Latin west was actively trying to cast out. However, the longevity of the belief in Prester John testifies to a cultural

undercurrent that valorized the potential of an inclusive Christian subject over one split by doctrinal disputation. In other words, the legend's desire to move beyond a typological view of the Christian subject destabilized the epistemological importance of heresy by emphasizing the natural spatial variance of the Christian landscape.

The Latins had to somehow rationalize the loss of Christian lands and the historical reality that Muslims ruled over Christian inhabitants — Prester John, whose India mirrored a now-Muslim controlled Edessa responded, according to the western imagination, with military promises intended to offset this loss. Although Prester John superficially appears as an eastern complement to the imagined prowess of western Christendom, the *Letter* and legend's general preoccupation with Islamic lore and its attention of contemporary cultural events positions Prester John as the West's Christian counterpart precisely because of his position as the uncanny double of Muslim success.

Waiting For Prester John

The uncomfortable intimacy between Jews and Christians for much of the Middle Ages had in the twelfth-century evolved into a more ontologically complex relationship when Islam, a combined military and ideological threat, finally emerged onto the theological landscape of the western Christian imaginary. Western Christians tried to understand the new faith by translating its holy book into Latin, they tried to map their understanding of Islam onto the structural plane of Catholicism, and then they tried to disavow the legitimacy of the faith by painting its prophet sometimes as the diabolical spawn of Satan, sometimes as a feeble trickster. The dissonant theories attached to the rise and significance of Islam in twelfth-century texts indicates either an inability or an unconscious refusal to comprehend the ideological impact of the new faith. Islam stood to disrupt the homeostatic position that Christianity held as the West's 'new faith' by casting a futural shadow that threatened to reshape the temporal perspective of the eschatological narrative of the Catholic Church.

The concept of ecclesiastically-sanctioned, theologically-driven conflict, of an idea of 'Holy War' had been fermenting within the Latin west ever since Augustine's writings on *bellum justum* in the fourth century, although the ideological beginnings of the Crusades were found more under the rubric of armed pilgrimage than holy war. Not until the mid-twelfth-century had these early fermentations of reconquest matured into a fully-fleshed crusading movement.⁷² It was the Latin Christians' structural position as

⁷² Medievalists maintain, of course, that the evolution of the concepts of Holy War and Crusade were far from linear and that the two terms are not interchangeable. See especially Carl Erdmann's hugely

the guardian of the tradition that brought them into unfamiliar territory. Christians had fought with Jews for a millennium over the rightful possession of what the two groups shared in spiritual heritage. Jews remained a threat to the Christian community (whether real or imagined), but Christians had a thousand years to evaluate themselves in relation to the Jews. Not until the twelfth-century did Latin Christendom north of the Pyrenees try to reckon with the theology of Islam, and it is clear that, unlike their Spanish neighbors who had hundreds of years of direct contact with Islam, these Latin Christians were not sure of where they stood. The creation of the Prester John legend is just one of several strategies employed in the twelfth-century to acknowledge the threat of Islam while maintaining an autonomous Latin Christian subjectivity that did not depend on defining itself against a theological Other.

Still, it is difficult to gauge whether the Prester John legend should be considered an effect of a series of overzealous miscognitions or as a rigorous attestation of faith. For the twenty-first century medievalist acculturated to an intellectual history which has since been characterized by the radical doubt of the post-Enlightenment subject, the speculative logic of the Hegelian dialectic, the linguistic turn of philosophy, and the establishment of language as ontological determiner, it would be too easy to assume that we can accurately locate and diagnose the errors of our medieval forebears. After all, how else can one explain the persistence of the Prester John fiction without recourse to modernity's psychiatric register, labeling such disregard for reason as paranoid and delusional. Yet

influential monograph, *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade*, trans. Marshall Baldwin and Walter Goffart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

where twelfth-century western Christians demonstrated faith in the ideal of a regimented Christian identity, modern scholars similarly contend with the monolith of Modernity. And yet, the position of a definable *societas Christiana* depends on the same system of belief that guarantees the wholly explicit epistemological cut of modernity. Thus, gesturing towards theories of impossible totalized subjectivity does not reveal a recourse to anachronism—attempting to prove *post hoc* the validity of a system of belief—for we have yet to fully graduate into a discourse of an ontology without transcendence. Indeed, our delusions of modernity echo in the same logical structure as the Prester John legend.

The Prester John legend lent stability to a culture of faith facing a crisis of identity. Talk of the eastern savior correlated with the need for ideological and military security. This is not to say that Prester John was a figure created specifically for the crusading movement. Tellingly, there was no mention of Prester John during the Third Crusade as a possible ally against Saladin, which may seem surprising given that Pope Alexander's written plea was sent to the east only ten years earlier, in 1177. Yet, with trusted military leaders such as Richard Coeur-de-Lion on hand, the Third Crusade already had the legendary commander at its helm for which the Fifth Crusade was perpetually and unsuccessfully waiting. Rather, Prester John seemed to emerge when western Christians faced either the threat or perception of something or someone missing. During times when a consistent Christian identity could be projected confidently, led into battle by a metonymic representative of the Latin Christian mission, there was no need to look eastward—these rare moments delivered on the promise of an enclosed *societas Christiana*.

By the mid-thirteenth century, when historical knowledge about the doings in the East had finally caught up to fantasmatic projections, the structure of the fantasy changed. East bound travelers came back to the Latin west with first-hand intelligence about the Mongols of the previous century that crusading advocates had fleshed out into the fiction of Prester John. Thus, the tone of the rhetoric began to change, and instead of casting Islam as the producer of a heretical antichrist, authors began to argue instead that *because* Islam and Christianity are so similar in doctrine, the conversion of Muslims to Christianity should be easy. Missionaries also sought out Mongols who, now better understood, were perceived as blank slates theologically. Already in 1245, Innocent IV had sent Franciscan John of Plano Carpini to the East to deliver letters to the Mongol khan, inviting the khan to embrace Christianity. It had not even been seventy years since Pope Alexander III, in response to the Latin *Letter of Prester John*, had likewise sent an envoy out to the East with similar intent. Although the fantasies might change, their ideological hold does not relent.

History reveals its intractable multiplicity as the characterizations of the narrative between East and West shift and reverse. Where Islam was once feared for its apparent valorization of sensual excess, twenty-first century westerners now expound on the dangers of terrorism perpetrated by a religion that is increasingly cast as fundamentalist. In the late twentieth-century, Edward Said famously puts forward a definition of orientalism that draws the lines of East and West as transhistorical and unrelenting.⁷³

⁷³ Briefly defined, Said puts it thus: "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus a very

Prester John also betrays the facile construction of an East and West by indicating the West's anxieties about their own 'orientalism,' that untapped exoticism inherent in their own subjectivities that westerners themselves were afraid to face. While for Said, orientalism consists of a fascinated objectification of the other along with a desire for containment, the Prester John legend complicates Said's formula by juxtaposing simultaneous desires to contain *and* grant excess. The lack of a definite location for Prester John and the ongoing desire to pinpoint his kingdom instantiate this contradictory fantasy while indicating a larger concern with borders for twelfth-century Latin Christians.

On the discourse of orientalism, Tolan writes that "the negative 'orientalist' portrayals of Islam that Edward Said denounces in his *Orientalism* as the ideological underpinnings of French and British colonialism in fact have their origins in the defensive reactions of Christian 'orientals,' unwitting subjects of the new Muslim empire."⁷⁴ In this vein, John Ganim's thesis in *Medievalism and Orientalism* is all the more relevant. Ganim attests to the twinned discourses of medievalism and orientalism by contending that the simultaneously foreign and domestic characterizations of the East echo the way that the influence of the Middle Ages has been deployed historically, since

large mass of writers... have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on. . . . the phenomenon of Orientalism as I study it here deals principally, not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient . . . despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a "real" Orient." See Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* [25th Anniversary Edition] (New York: Penguin, 2003), 1-3; 5.

⁷⁴ *Saracens*, 67.

the Middle Ages.⁷⁵ For Ganim, the Middle Ages itself cuts an uncanny figure, familiar to the narrative of European national identities, but alien for its perpetually haunting of the present even though it should not have influenced the teleological movement of history. The way that the Prester John legend attempts to collapse messianic time into the topology of Christian enclosure recalls Ganim's vision of the Middle Ages as a site of collapse, where influences are sometimes most western when they seem most eastern and *vice versa*.

Prester John's kingdom thus served two functions: first, to comprise the other half of the Christian enclosure, and secondly, to mark a phenomenological limit point of human experience, forging an end point that domesticated alterity under the banner of a sovereign priest-king upholding an orderly universe under a single eye, consecrated at a single point, and moving from the center outward – in Uebel's terms, as a way to “orient the Orient.”⁷⁶ The *Letter* and legend provide an important look into Holy War because they involved the intersection of ideology and imagination in a tangible, literalized way. Thus, Prester John's myth functioned as a reaction and proposed solution to suture the rift created by the trauma of loss, events including but not limited to the conflict between Alexander III and Frederick, the Normans in Sicily, Emperor Manuel at war with Venice, the fall of Edessa in 1144, and the failure of previous Crusades. Not only can we then affirm Geraldine Heng's assertion that “where Prester John goes, Europe is not far

⁷⁵ John Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism: Three Essays on Literature, Architecture, and Cultural Identity* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

⁷⁶ *Ecstatic Transformation*, 99.

behind;”⁷⁷ for the Fifth Crusade specifically, in the manner of Freud’s aphoristic *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*, we might say ‘where Prester John was (supposed to go), there the West will be.’

⁷⁷ *Empire of Magic*, 287.

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