HISTORIOGRAPHICAL STUDY

Prester John in European Written and Visual Traditions

A source-critical and historiographical study of witnesses preserved in European archives and libraries



Manuscripts · Archival letters · Historical maps

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Illustration numbers and shelfmarks connect the discussion, reproductions and repository register.

The subject of the study and its principal finding

The European tradition of Prester John is not a single, unchanging story. It survives in chronicles, a pseudonymous epistle, works adapted into different languages, travellers' accounts, diplomatic letters and maps. Reading this material together shows how a single name acquired new meanings in different settings: from a report of a distant ally, it passed into a literary representation of royal power, and then into explanations of historical events in Asia and Africa and the practice of diplomatic relations.

This study examines witnesses preserved in European repositories and available digitally, and assesses Giorgi Kavtaradze's research in comparison with them. The central questions are: what does each source say; when and in what form was it created; how has it reached us; what could its author have known; and what conclusions does a particular manuscript, archival letter or image permit us to draw? The arguments for the Georgian hypothesis are discussed in Chapter 10; the analysis of European texts provides a basis against which to compare them.

Several documentary layers emerge that must be distinguished from one another. Otto of Freising's text bears witness to a story circulating in the twelfth century. The numerous copies of the Letter of Prester John attest to the text's circulation and transformation. Mateus's sixteenth-century letters show that the legendary designation was also used in the diplomatic language of an actual envoy. These sources are connected by a common name, but they do not carry the same weight as historical evidence. [P1–P2; M2–M4; H8]

This is a comprehensive analysis of a selected, verifiable corpus, rather than a description of every European manuscript or a complete critical edition. Digital images inspected directly are identified separately; material confirmed through catalogues is not presented as a palaeographical examination of the original conducted in person. The bibliography also distinguishes works for which only a description, abstract or preface was available, rather than the full text.

How to read the references

The codes in square brackets refer to the bibliography at the end: P — an edition or translation of a primary source; M — a repository catalogue or digital object; H — modern scholarship; R — a scholarly repertory; K — a work by Giorgi Kavtaradze. A folio is a leaf of a manuscript: r denotes the recto, or front, and v the verso, or back. A "digital frame" is a number in the scanning sequence and is not equivalent to the manuscript's foliation.

1. What we verify in European repositories

A manuscript is both a text and a historical object. It may contain a twelfth-century story written by a fourteenth-century scribe and bound together with leaves of a different origin in the seventeenth century. Reading the date in a catalogue is

therefore insufficient to establish the age of a report. The date of the event narrated, the composition of the work, the production of the surviving copy and its subsequent history must each be established separately.

For example, Otto’s account of a conversation in 1145 and the Letter preserved in a thirteenth-century manuscript provide different kinds of chronological connection. The former indicates that the story was already circulating within a network of information exchange at a certain time. The latter confirms that a particular text of the Letter existed no later than the copying of that manuscript. Neither, in itself, permits us to date the activities of the king in the narrative by the date of the copy. [P1–P2; M2–M3]

Type of witness	What it verifies	What remains to be established
Archival letter	An address composed in a particular setting and its formulae	Whether it is an autograph, whether it reached its addressee, and the accuracy of the events described
Manuscript copy	The existence of a text and a particular reading	Its proximity to the lost original and dependence on other copies
Critical edition	The textual material compared by the editor	The full extent of the manuscripts used and the editorial decisions
Repository catalogue	The shelfmark, description, dating and localisation	Direct reading and verification of the attribution given in the catalogue
Map or miniature	The visual form of a representation and its circulation	The identity of the person depicted and the historical accuracy of boundaries

Within this hierarchy, “original” is a word requiring particular care. An early manuscript of a letter written in the name of the legendary John is a genuine medieval object, but that does not make it an authentic diplomatic letter from a real ruler. The antiquity of the object, the authenticity of the text and the reliability of the story it tells are three separate questions.

A coincidence of name and title is likewise insufficient. In an ordinary ecclesiastical document, “John the presbyter” may simply mean John the priest. A text should be included in the corpus of the legendary priest-king when the name is accompanied by the relevant narrative, royal titulature, geography or a textual connection with an already known work. Without these features, a search-engine match cannot count as a historical identification.

The European repository and the provenance of the source

Material preserved in London, Munich or Lisbon was not necessarily produced in Europe. A manuscript’s present location must be distinguished from its place of origin. This is particularly important for Mateus’s Arabic letters: they are now preserved in Portugal’s national archive, but relate to the envoy’s journey and the diplomatic world

of the Indian Ocean. In this instance, studying a European archive also means recovering the voice of a non-European actor. [H8]

2. Otto of Freising and the receipt of a report through an intermediary

The place of the episode of 1122

Discussions of the legend’s prehistory often mention reports of “John, Patriarch of India”, who came to Rome in 1122. Earlier historiography connected this episode with a letter by Odo of Rheims and another account, although scholars did not agree on its significance. Neither the manuscript basis of these two texts nor all the circumstances of the visit have been independently verified here. The episode is therefore noted as a separate strand of the prehistory: a story about an eastern ecclesiastic named John does not yet amount to a report of the military kingdom of a priest-king. [H14]

The conversation of 1145

Book VII, Chapter 33 of Otto of Freising’s Chronicle is one of the key early witnesses to the priest-king John in the European tradition. The author relates information received from Hugh, Bishop of Gabala, at Viterbo in 1145. In the narrative, a Christian ruler living in the distant East defeats the kings of Persia and Media and attempts to march to the aid of Jerusalem. An obstacle at the Tigris halts his journey. The story connects military victory, eastern Christianity, descent from the Magi and the ruler’s exceptional wealth. [P1–P2]

The first distinctive feature of this passage from a source-critical perspective is its chain of transmission. Otto does not speak as an eyewitness. What we have is an intermediary’s report recorded by the author; the channels through which Hugh himself received the story cannot be fully reconstructed from this passage. The historically secure conclusion is therefore that such a story was already available to Otto in 1145. Not every military and geographical detail of the story is equally secure.

A detailed examination of the report requires separate consideration of names, titles, the route and chronological indications. One possible correspondence, such as a victory connected with Persia, cannot automatically cancel out discrepancies in the other elements. Nor should the mention of the Tigris become a map of a precise route that the text does not describe. The geography of the source may contain both actual knowledge and the language of classical and biblical geography.

The text of the Chronicle and its manuscripts

The initial composition of Otto’s work and its subsequent revision should not be assigned a single date. The scholarly repertory distinguishes a recension of the 1140s from the version prepared for Frederick I in 1157. Ms. Bos. q. 6, preserved in the