

**“Configuring Faith, Locating Monarchs, Connecting Worlds:
The Strange History of Prester John across the Indian Ocean”**

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One of the most significant examples of a connected world lies in the medieval European visualisation of the domains of the mysterious Christian patriarch, Prester John who supposedly ruled over a large part of Asia.

The idea of Prester John surfaced during the European crusades as a possible Christian ally against the Saracens. Alas he was never satisfactorily located, but at different times in history he was thought to be ruling in Africa, India and also in the Mongol world, and he was represented as such in medieval Latin manuscripts and in early modern European maps and travel accounts. He was finally located in Ethiopia by Niccolo da Conti in the fifteenth century, but by then the need for a sympathetic Christian ally in the East was over.

What accounted for these locational shifts in the imagining of Prester John? Why did the legend continue even when medieval geographical explorations exploded the myth? The answer lies in the confounding of strategic-religious imperatives with classical geographical notions in the medieval West, particularly the persistence of the idea of a linked Africa and India. This, further complicated by the notion of the rivers of Paradise as real rivers, resulted in a confusion of the Nile with the Indus. Strangely, the search for Prester John was conducted against a background of expanding knowledge of the globe prior to the period of discoveries. Linked to these notions was the actuality of an open, navigable Indian Ocean and an overland connectivity facilitated by the Pax Mongolica. Prester John correspondingly shifted from Asia to Africa, usually ruling over lands along the Indian Ocean, and sometimes in Central Asia, but always along routes that connected West to East. In the Genoese Map of 1457, out of the forty three legends with more than four words, ten long and seven shorter ones deal with the Mongols, the area enclosed by Alexander, or Prester John, human connectors in history par excellence.

The idea of Prester John may be irrelevant today but the persistence of the idea and the endurance of his image across maritime and overland regions reinforces the fact that space was not homogenous and the conception of history was not necessarily linear. The example of Prester John shows that space was heterogeneously conceived, that a geographically-structured view of history and theology melded space and time and that faith and political imperatives connected the Indian Ocean and Central Asian worlds as much as economic compulsions or geographical contiguity.