The Power of Distance: The Transformation of European Perceptions of Self and Other, 1100-1600

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Abstract

Anthropologists such as Mary Helms have noted a historical linkage between the phenomena of perceived distance and perceived power. In this article I apply this paradigm to the history of European imperial expansion between the twelfth and the sixteenth century. In the Middle Ages, European popes and kings imbued the mythic ruler Prester John with great power in part because he was unseen and believed to live at a great distance. By associating the Mongols, and the Ethiopians after them, with Prester John, both of these peoples became an embodiment of this distance/power paradigm in Western European eyes. Latins hoped that the Mongols or Ethiopians would use their “power” to assist the West in their crusading battles in the Holy Land. When the Portuguese and Spanish began their voyages of expansion, they applied the same paradigm to the peoples they encountered in Asia, Africa and the Americas. When distance between Europe and these other continents was breached, however, the Iberian view of the others’ power diminished. Simultaneously, the Spanish and Portuguese perception of their own power increased as they, not “Prester John”, became the conquerors of distance.

Keywords

European expansion, Prester John, Mongols, Ethiopians, distance, Portuguese exploration of Africa, Columbus, New World

Introduction

Much of pre-modern Western diplomatic policy regarding the non-Western world was predicated on a belief that in lands beyond the realms of Western empirical knowledge were rulers and peoples of great political, military, economic and spiritual power. By crossing geographical boundaries, individuals pass into realms of unseen power. Medieval European elites frequently saw exploiting, conquering, and appropriating this distance's
concomitant “power” as an essential component in establishing their own  
prestige. One of the core elements in the medieval long-distance diplomacy  
was the basic assumption that the kings and peoples living in lands beyond  
the purview of European knowledge were powerful in ways that Europeans  
were not. In this idealized view, princes of Western Christendom and the  
papacy hoped to persuade these polities to establish diplomatic relations  
and would assist them in their fight against Islamic powers. Prester John,  
the mythic Christian king of the “Indies” whose existence was described  
in the twelfth century was perhaps the most notable of these “Eastern”  
rulers. The fact that he did not exist makes the prolonged search for him  
and his like even more remarkable. Based solely on rumor and wishful  
thinking, European princes and popes assembled armies, sent embassies  
and engaged in lengthy and dangerous diplomacy from the late twelfth to  
the mid sixteenth century in search of existence of these unseen lands.  
Royal prestige was wagered, crusading vows taken and foreign travelers  
feted, all because Prester John or another king or state was supposed to be  
“out there.” Even contemporary scholars have spent a considerable effort  
attempting to identify Prester John, the purported author of a number of  
pseudopigraphical “letters” to appear, and to find out if there really were  
Christians living in the unknown and unexplored regions of Central Asia  
and Africa.1 The issue at hand is not simply a matter of a single, isolated  
event, but of a phenomenon of long duration and global impact.

Anthropologists such as Mary Helms have noted a historical linkage  
between perceived distance and perceived power.2 The goal of this article  
is to apply this paradigm to the history of European imperial expansion. In  
doing so, I argue that in the Middle Ages, European popes and kings imbued  
the mythic ruler Prester John with great power in part because he was  
unseen and believed to live at a great distance. By associating the Mongols,  
and the Ethiopians after them, with Prester John, both of these peoples  
became an embodiment of this distance/power paradigm in Western

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1 See, for example, Lev Nikolaevich Gumilev, *Searches for an Imaginary Kingdom: The  
Legend of the Kingdom of Prester John*, trans. R.E.F. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University  
Press, 1987). On Gumilev’s rather “eccentric” work, see reviews by Robert Irwin, *Times Literary  
Supplement* (April 15, 1988), 429; David Morgan, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 121  

2 In this, I am following the work of anthropologist Mary Helms. See her *Ulysses’ Sail: An  
Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge and Geographical Distance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton  
University Press, 1986).
European eyes. Latins hoped that the Mongols or Ethiopians would use their "power" to assist the West in their crusading battles in the Holy Land. When the Portuguese and Spanish began their voyages of expansion, they applied the same paradigm to the peoples they encountered in Asia, Africa and the Americas. As I will show, when distance between Europe and these other lands was breached, the Iberian view of others' power diminished. Simultaneously, the sixteenth-century Spanish and Portuguese perception of their own power increased as they, not "Prester John," became the conquerors of distance.

By the time a man appeared at the Papal court in 1122, claiming to be a Christian patriarch from the Indies, Latin observers had already developed a strong distance/power paradigm, an equating of perceptions of distance with perceptions of power and, therefore, they willingly accepted the stories he told of the wealth and power of his homeland. This credence was based on two long-standing Western beliefs: that Christians existed in many parts of the world; and that there were, indeed, whole communities of coreligionists dwelling beyond the boundaries of the classical oikoumene established during the Roman Empire.

The relationship of distance to religion carried particular meaning to a twelfth century Church and a secular nobility engaged with Islamic states in a struggle for supremacy in the Mediterranean Basin. The visitor to the Papal court claimed to have come from the Indies—a land from which no churchman had appeared in the memory of those present in 1122.3 Such distant lands served as a tabula rasa, unknown lands upon which any picture one could conjure could be painted. As no one had actually visited these lands, they could be described as virtuous or sinful, wealthy or barren, monstrous or heavenly, without fear of contradiction. Even from classical times the Indies were often used as a place by which the foibles of the West could be judged and excoriated. Medieval travelers who wrote of Ethiopia or India or China, whether they had been there or not, described lands that embodied all of the virtues that would make them appear powerful yet

exotic enough to still intrigue their readers. The inhabitants of such distant lands were accorded a variety of powers, virtue and piety often in proportion to their distance from the central (in this case Western) metropole. Additionally, such powers were held to be culturally innate, rather than “artificially” adopted. If virtue made such peoples worthy allies, their reputed military prowess made such alliances seem practical on the battlefield, especially since Ethiopians, for example, were reputed to have exceptional martial skills. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the most common sign of ultimate temporal power granted to distant nations was their possession of great material wealth. Chinese silk became so emblematic of political and


5 Ethiopians, for example, were held to possess their virtues “naturally,” as opposed to the artificial virtues of the Persians or Greeks. On this, see Pericles Georges, Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 189. The Judeo-Christian tradition also contains this ideal. The only Ethiopian described with any detail in the Old Testament, Ebedmelech, is portrayed as the most moral of men, who attempts to liberate Jeremiah from the pit into which he had been cast. See Jer. 38:7-13. Critics of classical antiquity often found piety and virtue severely lacking in their own world, but easily attributable to the peoples of distant lands, as somehow naturally endowed. In Book One of the Iliad (1.423), for example, Zeus and the other gods go to visit the “blameless Ethiopians,” whom the Odyssey (1) refers to as the “remotest of men.” Strabo (Geography, 44.25) likewise, wrote of them as notable for their piety and justice. Similar virtue and piety was attributed to the Brahmins of India. On this, see R.C. Majumdar, The Classical Accounts of India (Calcutta: K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1960), chapter 13. See especially Pseudo-Callisthenes [Historia Alexandri Magni] The Greek Alexander Romance, trans. Richard Stoneman (London: Penguin, 1991), 3.10.

6 On battles against Ethiopia during the reign of Augustus, see S. Jameson, “Chronology of the Campaigns of Aelius Gallus and C. Petronius,” Journal of Roman Studies 58 (1968), 71-84; R.R.R. Smith, “Simulacra Gentium: The Ethne from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias,” Journal of Roman Studies 78 (1988), 55. See Herodotus, Histories, 2.29-32; 3.17-24; 4.183; Scylax, Periplus, 1.94. Both the Greeks and the Jews attributed military skill to the Scythians, dwelling in the world’s other extreme. See Herodotus, 4.81. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, this military prowess led them to be identified as the Gog and Magog described in Ezekiel, whose coming at the eschaton would bring the destruction of the world. See Ez. 38-39; Josephus, Antiquities, 1.6.1; Rev. 20:7. Medieval writers such as Jerome and Isidore of Seville followed the Jewish tradition. See De imagine mundi, 1.11.

7 Biblical texts noted Ethiopia’s merchandise. See Job 28:19; Is. 45:14. The wealth of the “Indies” had been brought back regularly to the Mediterranean, and its sources carefully catalogued. The Periplus Maris Erythraei detailed port after port along the route to India,
spiritual power that it clothed only the most powerful classes in the Mediterranean world.8 It is interesting to note, as we shall see, that once martial, material, and spiritual power was doubted, so too was doubted the worthiness and virtue of the nations thus described.

Prior to the Christianization of the Roman/Byzantine Empire, the pattern of associating power with distant lands had been well established. With the rise of Christianity, this power was meaningless if it could not somehow be appropriated by the Christian world. Thus, Ethiopia, India, and China each finds its place in a variety of evangelization narratives which often gained canonical status in the first five centuries of the common era.9

and their many goods for sale. See *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, ed. Lionel Casson (Princeton, 1989). Spices, in particular, were granted a certain aura, the very word itself deriving from the Latin *species*, meaning something special and distinctive. See *Periplus*, chapters 49 and 56.


Despite claiming supremacy over the known world of the *oikoumene*, the secular rulers of the West looked upon these distant Eastern kings as brotherly equals. One of the common threads that linked non-Western Christians together in Western supposition was that they shared a common political agenda. Mediterranean Christians saw the persecution of Christians by non-Christians anywhere in the world as sufficient reason for one Christian monarch to support another.\(^{10}\) The rise of Islam only served to heighten this view, for Western writers came to assume that Christian–Muslim antipathy was universal.\(^ {11}\) Therefore in 1122, while the actual appearance of an Eastern

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\(^{11}\) Both John of Damascus (700-ca. 754), who has been called the “real founder of the Christian tradition regarding Islam” and the Sibylline Pseudo-Methodius of the late seventh century both described Islam as a scourge that would ravage the earth until a king, long-thought dead, would rise up and overthrow the Ishmaelites, thereafter reigning in Jerusalem in peace and joy. See Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1960), 3. John (*De Haerisibus*, 100.1) begins his commentary on Islam by calling the Ishmaelites “the fore-runner of the Antichrist.” See Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The “Heresy of the Ishmaelites”* (Leiden: Brill, 1972); Ernst Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen: Pseudomethodius, Adso und die tiburtinische Sibylle* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1898; reprinted Turin: Bottega d’Erasmo, 1976), 59-96. Those Christians who lived in the Muslim world, the Jacobites, Copts and Nestorians, for their part, had little such animosity toward Islam. The tradition that develops in Egypt and the Coptic world, for example, was not as uniformly polemical as that which developed in Byzantium and the West. The author of a life of Coptic patriarch Isaac of Rakoti wrote of genuine friendship.
A priest, claiming to represent a king who epitomized the powers long associated with distance might have been unexpected, the stories of his land and leader were not, with a half-millennium’s worth of mythology to support his claims. An ambassador from the Indies was one who perforce represented a land of wealth. Similarly, a Christian, of whatever stripe, was sure to have a great animosity for Islam. It is no wonder that the “patriarch’s” arrival was heralded so enthusiastically. Stories he related of miracles associated with the shrine of the Apostle Thomas, who was believed to have proselytized in the Indies, were consistent with miracle tales from earlier generations. His wealth and power were likewise extraordinary, but not outside the bounds of credibility. Such confirmations were glad tidings to a Christendom shortly to be mired in an ongoing struggle with Islam for supremacy in the Mediterranean. Prester John was an unseen king whose power was imagined to be greater than that of the Western princes who lauded and sought him. Western rulers came to view distant allies as a necessary component in any crusading venture if the powers of Islam were to be defeated. The wide


13 Odo of Rheims, the well-respected abbot of St. Remy, claimed to have been present at the “patriarch’s” arrival, and related the circumstances that brought the traveler to Rome, in a letter to Count Thomas of Marle. For Odo’s letter, see Zarncke, “Der Priester Johannes,” 7:845-846. See, too, Vsevolod Slessarev, Prester John, the Letter and the Legend (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), 67-79.
14 The stories of the development of the “Prester John” legend are too lengthy to be developed in any detail here. Shortly after the fall of the Latin outpost at Edessa (in modern Syria) in 1144, Pope Eugenius III was told of a certain “Prester John,” a wealthy and powerful Christian king of the East, descended from the one of the magi (and thus, by association, connected directly to the nativity), who intended to come to the aid of his coreligionists at Jerusalem. His military prowess was reported by Otto of Freising, who described the defeat of the Persians by Prester John’s armies, “with dreadful carnage,” and noted how “he enjoys
dissemination of a papal letter to Prester John only served to heighten any sense of expectation of his arrival and the existence of such a powerful, Christian force beyond the boundaries of the known world.

Excitement peaked during the Fifth Crusade, when rumors circulated in 1221 that one King David, a Christian of the Indies, alternately identified as Prester John or one of his descendants, had been attacking Muslims in the East, and was en route to help the crusading armies of Latin Christendom.\textsuperscript{15}


While King David did not arrive, the rumors of his advent reflected the first tangible evidence that a truly powerful ruler might exist beyond Christendom’s frontiers, notably the conflicts arising in Central Asia between the Kara Khitai and the Chinggizid Mongols. The coming of the Mongols in the mid-thirteenth century, their invasions of eastern Europe and western Asia and their leaders’ rather ambivalent attitude toward both Christianity and Islam, prompted much Western conjecture. The Russians and the Georgians, the Christians with whom they had the earliest contact, first noted that they were powerful.16 This new power was something with which the Western world needed to come to terms, even to the point of admitting


16 “For our sins,” wrote the Novgorod Chronicler of the Mongol invasions of the Caucasus, ‘unknown tribes came, none knows who they are or whence they came … God alone knows.’ See [Novgorodskaja letopis’]. *Die erste Novgoroder Chronik nach ihrer ältesten Redaktion (Synodalhandschrift) 1016-1333/1352: Edition des altrussischen Textes und Faksimile der Handschrift in Nachdruck*, trans. Joachim Dietze (Leipzig, 1971), 95*-96*. For an English translation, see *The Chronicle of Novgorod*, trans. R. Mitchell and N. Forbes (London: Camden Society, 1914), 64. Yet, Queen Rusudani of Georgia wrote to Pope Honorius III (r. 1216-1227) that the invaders, while fierce, seemed to be Christians because of the cruciforms on their shields. See *Monumenta Germaniae historica. Epistolae saeculi XIII e registis pontificum Romanorum selectae*, eds. Carl Rodenburg and G.H. Pertz, 3 vols (Berlin, 1883-1894), 1, no. 251. Note, too that Andrew II of Hungary (r. 1205-1235), through his mediator Richard of San Germano, equated these new soldiers with those of King David and Prester John, whose appearance was rumored during the siege of Damietta. See Riccardus de Sancto Germano, *Chronica*, ed. Carlo Alberto Garufi, in *Rerum scriptores italicarum*, n.s., 7, no. 2 (Bologna: Rerum Italicarum Scriptores, 1938), 110f.
Mongol supremacy in military and political (if not spiritual) power. King Bela IV of Hungary (r. 1235-1270) sent an investigator to collect reliable intelligence, to the Mongol court in 1236-1237. His chronicle, combining accurate detail with flights of fancy, revealed a picture that would form the initial basis for the Western conception of the Mongol court. Here was a distant polity of great wealth and great military skill, which fit the distance/power paradigm. Their religion, apparently monotheistic, was neither Christian nor Muslim. Their king held great power and great respect from his subjects, which included many other kings, princes and rulers.17

The embassies sent shortly after the initial Mongol invasion of Europe in the 1240s are the first substantive example of a serious Western attempt to investigate cultural distance in any systematic way. In doing so, Western rulers hoped to acquire some of the power (whether it be material wealth or strength of arms) that made the khâns’ Eurasian conquests possible, and following the fall of Jerusalem in 1244, there could be no more opportune time for doing so. Pope Innocent IV (r. 1243-1254) initiated the West’s first systematic and reasoned response to the Mongol appearance. Having first convened a general church council in Lyon in 1245, in part to discuss the matter, Innocent appointed ambassadors to make their way across Asia to discover more of these invaders and to investigate the cultural distance which lay between the Latin Christian world and these powerful strangers. Having arrived at the Mongol camp outside Karakorum, the envoys witnessed the enthronement of the Grand Khan on 24 August 1246.

Their findings revealed several unexpected aspects of this new polity. The Mongols were a militarily and politically strong empire. The presence of subjects from Europe, Central Asia and China at the enthronement and the elaborate ceremonies with their pan-Eurasian audience and participants was sufficient proof of their wealth, resources, and broad political power.18 The ambassadors marveled at the power of a ruler able to move grand armies across such a vast distance with such ease; a distance that


18 Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, [Historia Mongolorum], The Story of the Mongols whom we call Tartars=Historia Mongalorum quos nos Tartaros appellamus: Friar Giovanni di Plano Carpini’s Account of His Embassy to the Mongol Khan, trans. Erik Hildinger (Boston, MA: Branden, 1996), 2.8.
surpassed coeval Latin logistical ability.\textsuperscript{19} Yet, several initial assumptions held by the Latins were quickly dispelled. The Mongol khân was not a compliant ally who would enter into a “partnership of equals” as the Pope and his envoys had hoped. Latin presumption of spiritual superiority, as expressed in early papal letters, requesting Mongol conversion was met with abrupt rejection. The Grand khan’s response to the Pope evinced amazement that anyone would dare question God’s will as manifested through his duly appointed agents, the Mongols.\textsuperscript{20} Despite these rebuffs, the prominent place of Christianity in the Mongolian Empire convinced the Western powers that, in time, conversion to the True Faith would accompany alliance.\textsuperscript{21} The Mongols’ power and the faith of some of their courtiers did little to change the view of distant, Eastern power that had existed in the West since classical antiquity. For the twenty years following the initial invasion in 1240-1 and the embassies of 1245-1246, the tenor of Western views of the Mongols changed from fear to great expectation. Hope that the future would foretell an alliance, or at least fruitful diplomacy, was bolstered in 1248, when Louis IX of France received Mongol ambassadors who brought with them stories created purely for Latin consumption that the Great Khân had converted to Christianity.\textsuperscript{22} Louis naively took the news of the khân’s Christianity at face value, as a sign of Mongolian willingness to enter into some form of alliance, and he sent his own ambassador to negotiate the details. Despite his envoy’s hostile reception, Louis IX continued to harbor interest in some form of contact with the Mongolian court, still looking upon them as “equals.” In 1253 he supported

\textsuperscript{19} Note his long list of the countries through which he and his companions traveled, Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, \textit{The Story}, 9.


the visit to the East of the Franciscan, William of Rubruck, who upon returning to Palestine from Karakorum in 1255, chronicled the nature of the cultural and religious life, as well as the political system and intricacies of the Mongol polity.23

Western optimism regarding a potential Mongol alliance continued throughout the 1250s and into the 1260s. The West received news of the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258 coupled with stories of the apparent mercy shown to the Christians of the city, as a highly encouraging sign of Mongol sympathies. The subsequent Mongol defeat by the Mamlûks at the battle of Ain Jalût in 1260, however, opened up the practical possibility of military alliance between the West and the Mongols of Iran, or Îl-khâns.24 The Îl-khâns realized that the Mamlûks of Egypt were formidable opponents whose defeat could not easily be orchestrated without some change in military and logistical tactics. The deserts of the Levant made the supply and practical needs of Mongolian mounted cavalry difficult to fulfill.25 Alliance with the Latins, with their naval technology and knowledge of Eastern Mediterranean siege warfare, offered a practical solution to defeat the Mamlûks and extend Mongolian political supremacy. The Latin goal of the return of Jerusalem, which had no doubt been explained in earlier embassies and through Mongolian intelligence, was an insignificant price to pay for the possible military expertise and technology the West could supply in the service of the khân’s ultimate plan of conquest. The Latins, of course, saw in the Mongol–Mamlûk conflict an exploitable situation through which the Holy Land could be recovered from the hands of Islam.26

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From the first, the Îl-khâns were careful to lay the necessary groundwork to foster a politically advantageous alliance with the West. The reigning Îl-khân, Hülegü had related himself through morganatic marriage to the Byzantine royal house, thus granting him credible Christian credentials in Western eyes. His first embassy to the West, in 1262-1263, explicitly promised the return of Jerusalem in exchange for assistance in defeating the Mamlûks. Pope Urban IV, impressed by the Mongolian initiative and with the earlier positive travelers’ reports clearly in mind, issued the bull *Exultavit cor nostrum* accepting the khân’s offer on behalf of Christendom.

Much of the Western speculation regarding Mongol intentions was still based on earlier notions of the power of Eastern princes who would gladly acquiesce to Western requests for conversion and alliance. The broad picture that develops from these contacts, and from the correspondence remaining to us, is that the Îl-khâns were accepted in Western courts as potential agents by whom European kings could derive their own glory through the defeat of the Muslims. They expressed little concern for the state of religious affairs in the Îl-khânate. What interested the kings of France, Aragon and England was the ability of the Îl-khâns to coordinate their forces in conjunction with potential crusades they themselves would chose to lead, rather than Îl-khânid desire to convert to Latin Christianity, even though much of this martial posturing on the part of the West belied their lack of logistical abilities.

The Church, for its part, also took the Mongolian offers of alliance and friendship seriously, if somewhat cautiously, choosing first to make overtures toward insuring Mongol conversion before committing wholeheartedly to any military enterprise. The General Church Council of Lyons (1274) raised the issue of a Mongolian alliance, but James I of Aragon (r. 1213-1276) was the only prince in attendance who might have been able to undertake

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any substantive crusade. Nevertheless, the account of David of Ashby, a Dominican who had spent nearly fifteen years in Iran and who was part of a delegation from the Îl-khan to Lyons describing the Mongol polity, and his delivery of a most friendly missive from the Îl-khan Abaqa (r. 1265-82), encouraged the Pope to declare that any future crusading army would seek active assistance of the Îl-khans.

The Council of Lyons produced few practical results regarding the Mongols. While continuing to look upon the distant Îl-khans as potential allies, there was no substantive change in Latin diplomatic policy, on any front. News from the growing merchant community in the East continued to tempt princes and commoners alike with tales of wealth and riches; of Christian princesses and armies of great strength. The Church, for its part, sent Dominican and Franciscan missionaries to Asia to work for the eventual conversion of the Îl-khan and his people. Despit these aspirations and efforts, Latin princes remained incapable of coordinating martial efforts. The tone of Mongol letters and appeals, while cordial, was clearly

30 Yet, even here, the ability of the Latins to coordinate among themselves was poor, as the masters of the Military Orders rejected James’s crusading proposals out of hand. Llibre dels fets dei Rei en James, chapters 476, 482.


33 But they spent far more time ministering to the spiritual needs of the increasingly large community of Italian expatriate merchants and traders along the silk route than in successfully converting the Mongols. See Luciano Petech, “Les marchands italiens dans l’empire mongol,” Journal asiatique 250 (1962), 549-574.

34 That enthusiasm overcame logistical practicality is clearly evident from the optimism expressed by a number of Western observers who were profoundly affected by the overtures from the East. The Majorcan polymath, Ramon Llull, who would have been serving as a courtier to James I when the king returned from Lyons in 1274, is an excellent case in point. More than any other theologian of his time, Llull took Gregory’s admonitions regarding the Îl-khans and their place in the recovery of the Holy Land to heart. While clearly desirous of
modulated and one can imagine an increasing sense of frustration at the Il-khanid court at Tabriz with Western incompetence.

In the aftermath of the 1291 fall of the crusader post of Acre, and the relinquishment of any Latin hold in the continental Levant, a change in tone, reveals a developing sense of crisis.35 As a consequence, the image of their conversion to the True Faith, Llull wrote extensively about the way in which a converted Il-khanate would provide the linchpin upon which any further Latin success in the eastern Mediterranean would depend. For his 1292 writings, see Ramon Llull, *Quomodo Terra Sancta recuperari possit*, ed. Jacqueline Rambaud-Buhot, in *Opera latina beati magistri Raimundi Lulli* 3 (Palma de Majorca, 1954), 96. He writes in this vein again in 1294 see, *Petitio Raimundi pro conversione Infidelium*, ed. Jacqueline Rambaud-Buhot, in *Opera latina beati magistri Raimundi Lulli* 3 (Palma de Majorca, 1954). See also Girolamo Golubovich’s notes on Llull’s *Liber Tartari et Christiani*, *seu Liber super psalmum Quicumque* in *Bibliotheca bibilografica della Terra Santa e dell’Oriente francescano*, 5 vols (Florence: Quaracchi, 1906-1927), 1:378-380.

35 Witness, for example, the two letters, written only days apart, by Pope Nicholas IV in 1291, and dispatched by the same embassy to the Il-khanid court. The first of Nicholas’s letters was largely filled with the friendly and vague platitudes common in many papal letters to the Il-khans throughout the latter half of the thirteenth century. The second, which seems to have been written after receipt of news about Acre’s fate, was a call to arms, noting the need for a united Latin front to launch a crusade, with the Il-khan’s praiseworthy might as an integral ingredient. See Archivio Segreto Vaticano 46, fol. 178v–179r, in Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen der Päpste*, 275. The Pope, in essence, came to believe that any concerns regarding Mongolian barbarity needed to be sublimated in response to an immediate crisis. It would be Western disunity, and not Mongolian paganism, that imperiled Christendom in the East. The Pope was joined in this view by the Franciscan Fidenzio of Padua, who had traveled extensively in the Middle East and had composed a tract shortly after Acre’s fall entitled *Liber Recuperationis Terre Sancte*, in which Fidenzio laid the blame for Acre’s fall on the moral laxity of the city’s Christian inhabitants and the disunity of the Latin world, expressly noted how the Il-khan had offered to help crusader armies in the past, urging that the offer be accepted in order to facilitate a *passagium* of recovery. Without any hint of reservation, he placed the Mongols in league with the Armenians and Georgians—the Christian polities of the region. See Golubovich, *Bibliotheca*, 21-7; Fidenzio de Padova, *Liber recuperationis Terre Sancte*, chapters 85-86 in Golubovich, *Bibliotheca*. See, also, Jacobus, de Vitriaco. *Historia occidentalis*, The Historia occidentalis of Jacques de Vitry: A Critical Edition, ed. John Frederick Hinnebusch, *Spicilegium Friburgense* 17 (Fribourg: University of Fribourg Press, 1972), chapters 1-5; William of Tyre, *Chronicon*, *Guillaume de Tyr Chronique*, ed. R.B.C. Huygens, Corpus Christianorum, contin. mediev, 63-63a (Turnhout: Brepols, 1986), 21-7. On crusading immorality in general, see Elizabeth Siberry, *Criticism of Crusading 1095-1274* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 72-95. Indeed, despite papal admonitions to the contrary, Latin princes were unable to maintain any semblance of peaceable order in the own lands. The Scottish succession crisis and the wars in Gascony occupied both the English and French monarchs for much of the 1290s. The Aragonese, for their part, were
the Mongols that came to dominate Western perceptions from 1291 onwards was one of strength, order, and goodwill, in contrast to Latin disarray. A planned invasion of Mamlûk-held Syria by the Mongol Îl-khân Ghâzân in 1299 collapsed when, despite repeated attempts to coordinate actions with the remaining Christian leaders of the Eastern Mediterranean, all attempts at joint military action failed, due in large part to Western inability to coordinate among themselves.36 As a consequence, subsequent reports of Ghâzân’s eventual invasion of Syria and Palestine had no credible Latin eyewitnesses and news of the his campaign reached the West in greatly exaggerated form, highlighting even more Mongol strength in the face of clearly willing to maintain contact, but were without any clear logistical or practical suggestions as to how this was to be achieved, as a rather vague letter of James I of late 1293 attests. See James to “Olvecacu,” 10 November 1293, in Martin Fernandez de Navarrete, “Disertacion histórica sobre la parte que tuvieron los españoles en las guerras de ultramar ó de las cruzadas, y como influyeron estas expediciones desde el siglo XI hasta el XV en la extension del comercio maritimo y en los progresos del arte de navegar,” Memorias de la Real Academia de la Historia 5 (1817), 175-176.

Latin failure. No longer were the Mongols simply potential allies: they were imagined to be the saviors of Christendom, the restorers of the Holy Places, and the mirror for the princes of the West to emulate. The rumors quickly spread that Ghâzân had captured Jerusalem, returned it to the Latins and, in some variants, had himself converted to Latin Christianity.\footnote{On this whole episode, see Sylvia Schein, “Gesta Dei per Mongolos 1300. The Genesis of a Non-Event,” English Historical Review 94 (1979): 805-819. Venetian merchants in Cyprus and the writing of a Cypriot Franciscan, one Giacomo de Ferrara, provided hearsay accounts to the West of Ghâzân’s “conversion,” shortly before his return to Iran in February 1300. Giacomo’s account is preserved in the Hagnaby Chronicle, and spoke of Ghâzân’s contacts with the Cypriots and Armenians. See London, British Library, MS Cotton Vespasian B XI, fols. 47-48.} In essence, he was believed to have achieved what the princes of the West had failed to do, in almost every respect—doubly so, as 1300 had been declared a jubilee year by the pope.\footnote{Little has been written on jubilees as a phenomenon. In general, see Egilberto Martire, Santi e birboni: luci e ombre nella storia dei giubilei; cronache di tutti gli anni santi dal 22 febbraio 1300 al 9 luglio 1950 (Milan: Barion, 1950). So convinced was Ramon Llull that the stories of Ghâzân’s conversion were genuine, he sailed to Cyprus hoping to meet with Ghâzân, and personally undertake the conversion of the Îl-khanid court and people. See Vita Coaetanea, in Raimundi Lulli Opera Latina 8, ed. Hermogenes Harada, Corpus Christianorum Mediaevalis, 34 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1980), lines 504-510.} This *Gesta Dei per Mongolos*, which found these conversion stories repeated in chronicles across Europe, fulfilled for many in the West the sense of wonder provided by the Prester John prophecies of the twelfth century. Western princes, reacting almost entirely on the basis of unsubstantiated rumor, prepared for a full crusade of recovery, but by 1302, no Western force or alliance materialized.

Following the fall of Chinggizid power in western Asia (1335-1336) and despite all evidence to the contrary, the West continued to harbor fantasies about the Mongols’ intentions and willingness to form an alliance. As the fourteenth century progressed, the fables and fantasies of the thirteenth century began to reappear, couched now in terms that disguised mythology behind a façade of credible facts.\footnote{For example, Sir John Mandeville, *Travels.* Mandeville’s Travels: Texts and Translations. ed./trans. Malcolm Letts, 2 vols, 2nd ser., 101-102 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1953).} By the end of the fourteenth century, many of the details regarding the difficulties of East–West diplomacy had been forgotten, or perhaps more accurately, conveniently misplaced, in favor of the more entertaining and satisfying myths of the East that had predominated in the early thirteenth century. As a consequence, when news of an invasion of Russia from the steppes by an unknown horde of
ferocious horsemen reached the West in the 1390s, initial reactions mirrored those of the 1230s and 1240s.

The fear that initially registers among the Latins comes first from vague and inaccurate reports from Venetians on the Black Sea, regarding a conflict between an unknown Tartar leader and the Ottoman sultan.⁴⁰ The situation resembled the invasion of Georgia and Russia by the Mongols in the 1220s. The defeat of crusading armies by Ottomans at Nicopolis in 1396 closely paralleled the equally devastating loss of Jerusalem in 1244. As in the thirteenth century, the suspicions once held for unknown Central Asian invaders soon were dissolved into curiosity and hope for Tîmûr and his mounted forces from Central Asia. The threat posed to Black Sea trade paled in comparison to the losses on the lower Danube and in the Balkans, and it became quite evident that the Ottoman Turks rather than Tîmûr (r. 1370-1405) was the most direct threat to the security of Western Christendom. The Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologos (r. 1391-1425)

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⁴⁰ Decision to respond to Manuel II, 24 July 1394 in Régistres des délibérations du Sénat de Venise concernant la Romanie, ed. F.E. Thiriet (The Hague, 1958-1961), no. 860. I would wager that the Venetians were in error as to the identity of Tîmûr’s foe. The date of the Venetian reports do not occur in a period of any Tîmûrid–Ottoman conflict. See Ahmet Zeki Validi Togan, “Timurs Osteuropapolitik,” Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 108 (1958), pp. 279-298. Rather, it is likely that these reports came in response to the sack of Baghdad and the flight of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir in the summer of 1393. It is possible that these reports came through Venetian traders/diplomats in Damascus or Egypt, where the sultan fled. Likewise, it could be in response to the Timurid sack of Baghdad in 1393. Missives were sent shortly thereafter from Venice to Toqtamish, khân of the Golden Horde, requesting protection for Venetian possessions. See Commission to Blanco de Pipa [consul to Tana], 22 February 1396; decision to send embassy to Tana, 20 February 1397; and Commission for Girolamo Contarini, 26 March 1400 in Régistres... du Senat, nos. 898, 927, 981; discussion of 19 December 1395 in Déliberations des assemblées vénitiennes concernant la Romanie, ed. Freddy E. Thiriet, 2 vols École pratique des hautes études. VIe section. Documents et recherches sur l'économie des pays byzantins, islamiques et slavs et leurs relations commerciales au Moyen-âge, 8, 11 (Paris, 1966-1971), no. 933. Yet, with Toqtamish’s capital at Saray sacked and burned by Tîmûr, there was little the Golden Horde could do to help their Western allies. The looting of Saray is only briefly noted by Beatrice Forbes Manz, The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane. Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 72. For a more thorough account in English, see Hilda Hookham, Tamburlaine the Conqueror (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962), chapter 4. See also François-Bernard Charmoy, Expédition de Timur I Lenk contre Toqťamiche en 1391 (Saint Petersburg, 1835).
applied to the French court for assistance against this new menace. In return, ambassadors were sent eastward from Castile, Aragon and France beginning in 1398, the process continuing until Timur’s death in 1405.

Following the failure of Western–Mongol diplomacy to achieve any fruition, the geographical locus of Latin diplomacy shifted from Central Asia to Northeast Africa. The kings of Ethiopia came to be held in the same regard as the Mongol khan, but with the added “advantage” that they were known to be Christians. As “brothers in Christ,” the West assumed the kings of Ethiopia would be willing allies in the fight against Islam. Latin motives were attributed to the Ethiopians for their conflicts with Egypt, as was the Latin goal of reconquering Jerusalem, and desire for arms for use in holy war. The key to understanding this perception of Ethiopia lay not merely in their faith, but in the state’s inaccessibility. Its prolonged isolation from contact with the West made it the perfect object for Western crusading hopes and aspirations. Long after active diplomacy with the Il-khan proved fruitless, Ethiopia remained aloof and exotic. And at a time of the West’s frustration with its own inability to unite against a common enemy, and its own sense of moral (as well as martial) imperfection, Ethiopia appeared virtuous and pure in its Christianity, untainted by the temptations of the all-too-secular world of the West.

41 On Franco–Byzantine relations at this time, see John W. Barker, Manuel II Palaeologos (1391-1425): A Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship, Rutgers Byzantine series (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 154-169. Much has been written on Manuel’s subsequent journey to the West in search of aid. See, notably, John W. Barker, Manuel II Palaeologos; Donald M. Nicol, “A Byzantine Emperor in England: Manuel II’s Visit to London in 1400-1401,” University of Birmingham Historical Journal 12 (1971), 204-225; G. Schlumberger, “Un Empereur de Byzance a Paris et a Londres,” in Byzances et croisades: Pages médiévales (Paris, 1927), 87-147, but this topic lies somewhat outside the scope of the present work.

42 Of the ambassador, Francis Sandron, little is known, yet he was to become one of Timur’s primary ambassadors to the courts of the West throughout the remaining seven years of Timur’s reign. Silvestre de Sacy was of the opinion that Sandron was with the French contingent at Nicopolis and made his way eastward from there, though his evidence is quite sketchy. See Silvestre de Sacy, “Mémoire sur une Correspondance Inédite de Tamerlan avec Charles VI,” Mémoires de l’Institut Royal de France, Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres 6 (1822), 514. Two later scholars of Nicopolis make no mention of Sandron as a member of the French contingent. See Joseph Marie Antoine Delaville le Roulx, Le France en Orient au XIVe siècle: expéditions du maréchal Boucicaut (Paris, 1886); and Aziz Suryal Atiya, Crusade of Nicopolis (London, 1934). On Timur and the West and the other diplomatic ventures into Timurid territory prior to 1405, see Adam Knobler, “The Rise of Timur and Western Diplomatic Response, 1390-1405,” Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, series 3, 5, no. 3 (1995), 341-349.
By the time of the Mongol invasions of eastern Europe, Ethiopia's isolation from the West was absolute, in contrast to its regular contact with Byzantium and Armenia in late antiquity. No equivalent to the Mongol “silk route” joined the Horn of Africa with the central and western Mediterranean, and any journey would necessarily be made through a combination of mountain paths, desert caravans and river or Red Sea sailings, likely combined with some medium-distance portages between river and sea. Even today, the ancient imperial cities of the Ethiopian highlands are served by roads that make modern bus transport slow, and some locations, such as the great church complex at Lalibäla, are still inaccessible by road during Ethiopia's rainy season. Ethiopia was as remote from the Medieval Latin West as any place in the known world. By 1300, vaguely located in the “Indies,” Abyssinia had become more of a catch phrase for an exotic locale rather than any real or readily identifiable region in Africa.43

Given Ethiopia's isolation, the appearance of an Ethiopian embassy in Europe (ca. 1310) is a surprise, and was viewed as an extraordinary event at the time.44 No confirmation of the arrival of this embassy exists in any papal source, but scholars have suggested its prolonged stay in Genoa to be the source of the map that first equates Ethiopia with the land of Prester John.45 Considering the faltering state of Latin–Il-khânîd diplomacy and

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43 On belief in Ethiopia's geographical inclusion in the “Indies,” see John Kirtland Wright, The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades: A Study in the History of Medieval Science and Tradition in Western Europe (New York, NY: American Geographical Society, 1925 (reprinted New York, NY: Dover, 1965)), 303. Papal embassies to China or other Eastern locales, were often given letters to Ethiopian dignitaries, to deliver en route. John of Monte Corvino, for example, was given letters for the “Archbishop” and Emperor of Ethiopia by Nicholas IV (July 7 and 11, 1289, respectively). See Les registres de Nicholas IV, nos. 2233, 2247; Luke Wadding, Annales minorum, seu trium ordinum a S. Francisco institutorum, 32 vols (Rome/Naples/Ancona, 1731-1933) vol. 5, ad. an. 1289, nos. 10, 12. Claims, such as those of Marco Polo, to have actually visited the region, must be taken as pure fabrication. For Polo's commentary, see Il milione, chapter 193; Carlo Conti Rossini, “Marco Polo e l’Etiopia,” Atti del Reale Istituto Veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti 99.2 (1940), 1021-1039.


the concomitant demystification of the Mongols, elements of the earlier Prester John mythology began to coalesce around the Ethiopians and their emperor in an “Ethiopianization of paradise.”

From this point until well into the seventeenth century, European commentaries and diplomatic correspondence always referred to the Ethiopian ruler as “Prester John.” While a fifteenth-century chronicler wrote that this first embassy came to request help against the Infidels from Pope Clement V (r. 1305-1314) at Avignon and from James II of Aragon (r. 1291-1327), it is far more likely that the purpose of the embassy was to obtain skilled craftsmen from the cultural centers of Italy for use at the royal Ethiopian court.

The literature that appeared in the West immediately following this first embassy spoke of the Ethiopian king as a willing accomplice in any attack upon Islam. Despite these assertions, plans remained mere fancies, and

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48 Het’um’s Flor spoke of the Ethiopians as potential crusaders. His section on Ethiopia suggested some familiarity with northeast African religion and politics, deriving, as it must have done, from the long-standing bonds of religious and cultural contact between Ethiopia and his native Armenia. See Richard Pankhurst, “The History of Ethiopian–Armenian Relations,” Revue des Études Arméniennes, n.s. 12 (1977-1978), 273-345 and 13 (1978-1979), 259-321. Note the existence of several medieval Ethiopian manuscript fragments (some from the fourteenth century) in the Ejmiacin library in Yerevan, which have now been transferred to
no substantive contact was achieved. However, accounts of Ethiopian–Mamlûk tensions and hostilities, both genuine and fabricated, continued to inspire Western hopes of an alliance with their as-yet-unseen coreligionists. Such rumors continued as Ethiopian envoys repeatedly made their way from the Horn of Africa to Europe, while official European embassies were often waylaid or disappeared en route. The ambassadors who did arrive from Ethiopia were, themselves, mostly Italian-born craftsmen who, like the Italian merchants who had served the Îl-khâns in a similar capacity, conducted long range diplomacy for the Ethiopian kings. Europeans reacted to such embassies by calling for military and diplomatic alliance. Perhaps the most noteworthy reaction to one of these early embassies came in 1427, when Alfonso V of Aragon and Sicily (r. 1416-1458) and John, the Duke of Berry received delegations from Ethiopia. Keen to employ the Ethiopians as crusading allies, Alfonso proposed a marital union between Aragon and Ethiopia. In addition, Alfonso offered to arm a fleet in order to assist negus Yishaq (r. 1414-1429) against the Mamlûks. Aragonese interest was, of

the Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, Matenadaran. These were reported by Boris Alexandrovich Turaev, “Iz armiano-abissinskikh snoshenii,” Zapiski vostochnago otdeleniia imperatorskago russkago arkheologicheskago obschestva 21 (1911-1912), 3-15. Ever the pragmatist, Het’um noted that it would be necessary for the West to exploit Mamlûk fear of the Ethiopians and Nubians (Het’um, La Flor des estoires, 4.23). He also recommended that Armenian intermediaries could most effectively serve as diplomatic intermediaries between the two distant worlds. William Adam, likewise, wrote in the fourteenth century of the likely sympathy the Ethiopians would hold for any crusade against Islam. See Guillelmus Adam, De modo Saracenos exstirpandi, ed. Charles Kohler, in Recueil des historiens des croisades: documents arméniens 2 (Paris, 1906), 551. The fourteenth-century Venetian Marino Sanudo, referring to the Damietta prophecies regarding the Muslim fear of a black king from the south, also spoke of the Ethiopians as potential allies. See Marino Sanudo, Liber secretorum fidelium crucis super Terrae Sanctae recuperatione et conservatione… (Hanover, 1611 (reprinted Toronto, ON: Peregrina, 1972)), 32.

49 See, for example, a letter addressed to “the king of Abyssinia, Prester John,” from Henry IV of England, written in 1400 and found in Royal and Historical Letters During the Reign of Henry the Fourth, King of England and of France, and Lord of Ireland, ed. Francis Charles Hingeston-Randolph, 2 vols, (London: Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores, 1860-1865), 1:421-422.

50 His niece, the Infanta Doña Juana, was to marry the negus Yishaq himself, while his brother, Infante Don Pedro, would marry an Ethiopian princess of the negus’s choosing.

51 Alfonso V to Yishaq, May 15, 1428, in MS. Archivo de la Corona de Aragon, reg. 2680, fol. 163, noted in Charles Germain Marie Bourel de La Roncière, Le découverte de l’Afrique au moyen age: cartographes et explorateurs, 3 vols, Mémoires de Société royale de géographie d’Égypte, 5-6, 13 (Cairo, 1925), 2316 n.4. The offer was sent to Ethiopia via an embassy, with
course, partially predicated on the idea that Ethiopia was already at war with, or inherently hostile to, the Mamlûks.⁵² The appearance of more Ethiopian envoys at the Aragonese court only served to reinforce such ideas.⁵³ An Alfonsine letter to the Ethiopians of September 1450 not only spoke of the labor the king was sending, but also requested the Ethiopian ruler to divert the Nile and that he join the Aragonese in an attack against Egypt.⁵⁴

The Mamlûks of Egypt, as well as their predecessors, harbored fears about the same type of alliance about which the Latins dreamed. The

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⁵² A letter, written by Jean de Lastic, the Grand Master of the Hospitallers at Rhodes, to Charles VII of France (dated 3 July 1448) described the Ethiopian ruler's victories over his Muslim opponents, and stated in no uncertain terms that it was the intention of the negus to destroy Egypt, Arabia and Syria in due course, something which, of course, the Latins had been unable to do themselves. See Chronique de la maison de Lastic, d'après les archives du château de Parentigat et quelques autres documents, ed. François, Marquis de Lastic, 3 vols (Montpellier, 1919-1921), 329-330. This same news was reported four years later by Jean Germain, the bishop of Chalon-sur-Sâone (bordering the county of Burgundy). See Jean Germain, Le Discours du Voyage d’Oultremer au très victorieux roi Charles VII, ed. Charles Schefer, “Le Discours du Voyage d’Oultremer au très victorieux roi Charles VII, prononcé, en 1452, par Jean Germain, Éveque de Chalon,” Revue de l’Orient Latin 3 (1895), 326, 330.


⁵⁴ Gaston Wiet, “Les Relations Égypto-Abyssines sous les Sultans Mamlouks,” Bulletin de la Société d’Archéologie Copte 4 (1938), 129-130; Francesco Suriano, Il Trattato di Terra Santa e dell’Oriente, ed. Girolamo Golubovich (Milan: Artigianelli, 1900), 86. The power to divert the course of the Nile at will was believed in Europe to be a critical power of the Ethiopian negus, and a sign of his temporal power and value as a military ally. On this phenomena, which lies somewhat outside the scope of this article, see Tadesse Tamrat, Church and Society, 256 n.3. Despite the Western emphasis on crusade and military alliance, the năgäst held very different expectations for these new diplomatic contacts than did their Western coreligionists. Repeatedly, the Ethiopian desire was not for arms or marital alliance, but for the services of skilled Western craftsmen. These craftsmen who came to represent the Ethiopians in their dealings with Western courts since chief among their requests were more artisans.
Muslim rulers of Egypt and the Levant, for their part, had no trouble in identifying Christian Ethiopians, their faith and the possible difficulties that might ensue, if the Latin crusaders were able to ally with their coreligionists in the Horn of Africa. Additionally Muslims believed that Egypt’s very life blood, the Nile, could be halted by the power of the Ethiopian negus, fueling Muslim fears. This belief came to be significant, both for Western perceptions of Ethiopian Christians and for Ethiopian presentation of their own power to the outside world. As with the West, Ethiopia’s relative isolation from the Muslim world allowed such rumors and mythologies to persist.

By the time Portuguese emissaries reached the Ethiopian court in the late 1490s, their expectations of what they would find had largely been conditioned by the false hopes that Prester John would be discovered and that the final crusade was at hand. The Ethiopians, for their part, expected the Westerners to continue to assist in supplying their kings with artisans and technology and the concomitant prestige of the latter. The Mamlûks, fearing alliance, attempted to intervene without much success. Ethiopia had

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57 The Italian chronicler Niccoló da Poggibonsi, writing in the mid 1340s, noted that the sultan had banned the passage of Ethiopian pilgrims through his territories, afraid that they would make contact with Latins intent on the destruction of Islam—a fear he felt was justifiable. See Niccoló da Poggibonsi, Libro d’Oltramare, ed. Alberto Bacchi della Lega, 2 vols, Scelta di curiosità letterarie inedita o rare dal secolo XIII al XIX, 182-183 (Bologna, 1969), 2,
thus come to the forefront of European diplomatic expectations in “the Indies.” The court of Aragon, in particular, saw Ethiopia as a strong and ready military ally, sharing a common antipathy toward Egypt. If the Mamlûks were to be stymied and the dream of the recovery of Jerusalem made a reality, Ethiopia was clearly to play a part. However, the 1479 Treaty of Alcaçovas, which ended a three-year conflict between Castile and Portugal, also brought an end to any Aragonese diplomacy in northeastern Africa. The marital union of the Castilian and Aragonese monarchs in 1469, and the treaty’s recognition of Portuguese sovereignty in Africa, placed Portugal, rather than any of the Spanish kingdoms, in the position of bringing Latin diplomacy with Ethiopia to fruition.

The establishment of the Portuguese maritime empire marked a significant shift in how the West viewed and implemented long-distance diplomacy with distant kingdoms. In the early fourteenth century, the immediate martial goal of the Portuguese had little to do with the establishment of any global empire, but dealt rather with participation in the reconquest of the Iberian peninsula from Islam and extension, if possible, of Christendom’s, and their own, power in the Maghrib. Considering the Atlantic orientation of Portuguese fishing fleets and the increasingly nationalistic nature of the Spanish Reconquista, Africa, rather than the eastern Mediterranean or Iberia, was the logical target for a Portuguese holy war. Combating Islam in Morocco was, and would remain, the central crusading preoccupation for the Portuguese monarchy for a period of more than two hundred years, although it was laden with tactical and financial difficulties that would take

an extraordinary toll on Portuguese resources and manpower. Following the initial, successful occupation of the Moroccan coastal city of Ceuta in 1415, Portuguese martial failures outnumbered their successes. Money and military support were vital if Portuguese fortunes were to be reversed. The initial Portuguese voyages down the western coast of Africa sponsored by Prince Henry “the Navigator” (1394-1460) were therefore intended to seek gold to promote the campaigns and alliances by which Morocco could be assaulted “from behind.”

In addition, the discovery of gold, the launching of crusade and the conquest of distance would supply the monarchs of Portugal with prestige. The royal house of Avis believed that to impress its contemporaries it had to display a feat of arms or diplomacy worthy of Iberia’s great crusading past. Attempts, many ignominious, to establish bonafide crusading in the Maghrib defined much of Portuguese action in the early fifteenth century. By Henry’s time the supposed wealth and power of Prester John was clearly identified with Ethiopia. An African alliance would make victory in a Maghribian crusade a certainty. Reaching such a distant ally across the unknown seas and an unexplored continent, would bring the prestige the Portuguese royal house so greatly desired and would do so as Portuguese cosmography had long dictated: through the aegis of a redeemer from afar. Enshrined at the very core of Iberian cultural identity was the mythology of the *encobrierto*, the hidden one: a king, blessed by fate and fortune, who would return from a distant exile to liberate his chosen people and reign in glory. The idea that Portugal’s destiny lay in the hands of one who would come from afar made them ideally suited to become responsible for the search for a distant ally such as Prester John, which became the “obsessive preoccupation” of the imperial policy of John II.

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The 1479 treaty of Alcaçovas, which procured Castilian recognition of Portuguese sovereignty in Africa, provided the vehicle by which Portuguese global destiny would be implemented. The Portuguese envisioned Prester John, and the other Christian kings they hoped to find, as an equal: a brother with whom they could assault Islam in concert. This assumption, based on the same ones that had driven earlier Latin diplomacy with Ethiopia, presupposed the Christians of the East as wealthy, powerful and imbued with the same type of anti-Muslim animus that existed among Latin rulers and states in the West. Making an alliance with Prester John in order to defeat the Muslims of the Maghrib would also imply that the newfound ally would have the ability to master the distance between his lands and northwest Africa to effectively support the forces coming from Portugal. So certain was John II that these factors would all be true that his agents took extraordinary lengths to find Prester John and link his forces with the Portuguese.

If the location of Prester John and the acquisition of his assistance for a Maghrib crusade was the ideological cornerstone of the reign of John II, the messianic crusade for Jerusalem was to mark the rule of his successor, Manuel (r. 1495-1521). At the heart of Manuel's imperial and crusading ambitions, and within that context, his desire for alliance with Prester John,

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61 John's initial policy regarding the Kingdom of Kongo is a case in point. Kongo, on the west coast of central Africa was to be the base for establishing a Christian outpost through which Prester John could be reached. See Rui de Pina, Cronica de el-rei D. João II, in Cronicas, ed. Manuel Lopes de Almeida, Tesoura da literatura da historia (Oporto, 1977), chapter 58; Damião de Góis, Cronica do Felicissimo rei D. Mañuel, new edn., 4 vols (Coimbra, 1949-1955), pt. 4, ch. 54. The same plan of action was noted after the rounding of the Cape by Bartolomeu Dias at Angra and by Da Gama's crew at Moçambique Island. See Alvaro Velho, Roteiro da primeira viagem de Vasco da Gama (1497-1499), ed. Abel Fontoura da Costa, 3d edn. (Lisbon, 1969), 22 [2 March 1498]. Much of early Portuguese activity in on both African coasts was occupied with this continuing search for the elusive crusading ally, whose presumed military strength and strategic location was believed to hold the key to a successful crusade. Two envoys were dispatched in 1487 and one of them, João Pera da Covilha, traveling via Aden and Cairo, finally arrived at the court of negus Iskindir (r. 1478-1494) in 1494. See João de Barros, Ásia, ed. Hernani Cidade, 4 vols (Lisbon, 1945-1946), 1.3.5. On this subject in general, see C.F. Beckingham, “The Travels of Pero da Covilha and their Significance,” in Actas do Congresso Internacional de Historia dos Descobrimentos, Lisboa, 1960 (Lisbon, 1961), 33-16, reprinted in Between Islam and Christendom: Travellers, Facts, and Legends in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (London: Variorum, 1983).
was the possibility of a direct crusade against Muslim lands in the Eastern Mediterranean. His plans to reconquer Jerusalem date to as early as 1505.62 This project lay at the root of all Portuguese imperial efforts during Manuel’s reign.63 Manuel, like the Castilian queen Isabel, had been imbued with the religious, eschatological theology of Joachim de Fiore from an early age. For Manuel, the recapture of Jerusalem and an assumption of the title “Emperor of the East” or “Universal Emperor” was as much a matter of prophecy fulfillment as any economic or mercantile enterprise.64

The Indian Ocean, only recently entered at the time of Manuel’s succession, fit neatly into the king’s vision of himself as a crusader. Much of his thinking and that of his courtiers was conditioned upon the initial belief that the Indies were a region full of Christian polities, inhabitants and armies who could readily be persuaded to enter into the fray against their “natural” Muslim enemies. The Portuguese assumed that these polities’ Christianity would induce them to assist the Portuguese in their crusading scheme, and so they should be favored in all matters over any other native peoples.65 Based on the stories of Saint Thomas’s apostolic mission to the Indies, the initial efforts by the Portuguese were thus directed toward contacting the indigenous Christians in the East, insuring the acquisition of the spices and profits necessary for Manuel’s crusade.66 The oft-repeated quotation from Vasco da Gama, announcing to two Indian Muslims at Calicut that he came “in search of Christians and spices,” manifests this intention.67

64 He was, in fact, seventh in line to the throne, those ahead of him in succession all having died, had a curious physical appearance (“arms so long that the fingers of his hands reached below his knees”). See Thomaz, “L’idée impériale manueline,” 90ff; Thomaz, “Factions, interests and messianism,” 97-109.
65 Instruction to this effect given to Almeida (5 March 1505) in Afonso de Albuquerque, Cartas de Affonso de Albuquerque, ed. Raymundo Antonio de Bulhão Pato and Henrique Lopes de Mendonça, 7 vols, Colleccção de monumentos ineditos para a historia das conquistas dos Portuguezes em Africa, Asia e America (Lisbon, 1884-1935), 2.318.
66 Summary of a report by Diego Lopes de Sequeira (13 February 1508) in Albuquerque, Cartas 2, 415.
Help from such powerful and distant allies would ensure the fulfillment of Manuel’s destiny and that of the Portuguese nation.

The initial reports from the East were quite encouraging. The Roteiro of Da Gama’s first voyage, confusing Hindus for Christians, stated that coreligionists were to be found in almost all of the states lying to the east of Calicut. The potential use of such Christians in military action was clearly present in Da Gama’s mind, and the Roteiro provides information on the availability of armed men and of war elephants in each of the nations. This finding was quickly reported to the king upon Da Gama’s return to Portugal. Manuel wrote to his in-laws, Ferdinand and Isabel, of the Christian wealth and abundance that his sailors had discovered, information that he had to have known they wished to hear.

As further contacts were made with the Christian communities of the Indian Ocean, however, the truth of the situation proved to be somewhat different from earlier Portuguese expectations. The Thomas Christians of India, while having access to the spices and riches of the East through their service as merchants and customs officers, did so, not as independent rulers of their own Christian kingdom, but as agents and subjects of Hindu and Muslim rulers. They had neither the force of arms nor the deep loathing of Islam that the Portuguese had hoped to find and of which they themselves had boasted of possessing. While the community did express some interest in establishing formal relations with Portugal, it was not in the

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68 Velho, Roteiro, 4 April 1498 (Christians at Kilwa); 19 April 1498 (Christian Indians at Malindi); from 21 May 1498 (Christians at Calicut).
69 In “Relação geográfico-comercial dos reinos ao sul de Calecute,” in Velho, Roteiro, 85-93. Similar reports were written of Christians and Christian-Muslim conflicts along the East African coast, reports which were echoed in royal circles as well as in the writings of mariners. See Velho, Roteiro, 32-33 [10-11 April 1498]. Also see the letter from Mañuel to Fernando II of Aragon, 1499, in Alguns documentos do Archivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo acerca das navegações e conquistas portuguezas por ordem do governo de sua majestade fidelíssima ao celebrar-se a commemoração quadreencentenaria do descubrimento da America, ed. José Ramos Coelho (Lisbon, 1892), 95.
70 See the letters of Manuel to Isabel of Castile (the first has no date; the second of 12 July 1499) in Velho, Roteiro, 193-195. This might have only been a bit of braggadocio for the actual contact with the Thomas Christian community of Kerala was only made after the landing of Cabral in 1500. See Letter of Manuel I to Ferdinand and Isabel, 29 July 1501, in The Voyage of Pedro Alvares Cabral to Brazil and India, trans. William Brooks Greenlee, Hakluyt Society Publications 2nd ser., 81 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1938), 48-49.
71 Even some of the Portuguese voyagers themselves stated that Da Gama and Cabral had stretched the truth. See “The Anonymous Narrative,” in Voyage of Pedro Alvares Cabral, 79.
capacity of equals but as clients. In 1502, Da Gama was met by a Christian delegation from Craganore, which declared its desire to submit to the authority of the Portuguese, reaffirming its allegiance to the Pope.\(^7^2\) While the Portuguese must have found these tributes quite gratifying, it was not the anticipated relationship of equals which they would need to achieve their original crusading goals. The Thomas Christian community could be of assistance to the royal crusading scheme only in so far as it might divert trade away from Levantine Muslim traders operating in the region. The Portuguese themselves represented a powerful, distant ally in the eyes of the Thomas Christians, rather than the Indies providing a suitable ally for Portugal.\(^7^3\) Shortly after initial contact, the Portuguese were acting as benefactors of the Thomas community.\(^7^4\)

Reality also fell short of the Portuguese expectations regarding Prester John’s kingdom in Ethiopia. True, here was a distant state, governed by a Christian king. Yet when they were finally reached in 1508, the Ethiopians were not willing allies. The initial reception of the Portuguese in Ethiopia was frosty, especially from churchmen, who were justifiably wary about Latin theological intentions, and who would just as soon have seen a rapprochement with the Mamlûks.\(^7^5\) This aside, the negus was, himself, under

\(^7^2\) Barros, Ásia, 1.6.6; Thomé Lopes, Navegação às Índias Orientaes, in O Porto nas navegações e na expansao, ed. Antonio Augusto Ferreira da Cruz (Lisbon, 1983), 196-197; Georg Schurhammer, “Three Letters of Mar Iacob Bishop of Malabar 1503-1550,” Gregorianum 14 (1933): 70; Brown, Indian Christians, 13; Diógo de Couto, Da Asia, in Da Ásia de J. de Barros e D. de Couto . . . decada primeira—undecima, 23 vols (Lisbon, 1777-1788), dec. 12, chapter 5. This submission was restated a year later, when Afonso de Albuquerque was given gifts for Dom Mañuel from the Christians of Quilon. See Afonso da Albuquerque, Commentarios do grande Afonso de Albuquerque, capitão geral que foi das Índias Orientais em tempo do muito poderoso rey d. Manuel, ed. Antonio Baião 4 pts. in 2 vols (Coimbra, 1922-1923), 1:14-15; Schurhammer, “Three letters,” 70; Stephen Neill, A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 196.

\(^7^3\) Note, for example, how four bishops from Kerala, writing to the Nestorian Catholicos, Mar Elias, in 1504), praying for the Portuguese king and expressing the community’s willingness to support the Portuguese in their Holy War. See the text of the letter in Schurhammer, “Three letters,” 66.

\(^7^4\) In fact, it was the Portuguese viceroy, Afonso de Albuquerque who gave funds to the Thomasite bishops of Cananore in order to restore their dilapidated church. See letter reproduced in Schurhammer, “Three letters,” 70.

\(^7^5\) Latin theological expectations (or behavior) also struck a sour note on Coptic Socotra, where the Portuguese factory became the subject of a boycott. See Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, História do descobrimento e conquista da Índia pelos portugueses, ed. Pedro d’Augusto de São Bartolomeu Azevedo, 4 vols, Scriptores rerum Lusitanarum, sér. A (Coimbra,
threat from a variety of internal forces within Ethiopia and, as in India, the Portuguese found themselves being looked to for assistance rather than as partners in a broader, anti-Islamic holy war. In 1508, Imam Mahfudh, governor of Zäylä’ (in the northeast), declared a jihâd against the Ethiopia Christian state, for which he received support from the ‘ulamâ’ in the Hejaz, as well as from a large number of volunteer soldiers from Arabia. This attack, rather than any overt action by the Mamlûks, prompted Empress Illeni, the regent for the young Ethiopian emperor Libnä Dingil, to write to the Portuguese asking Máñuel for assistance. The level of polemic and fear in her letter was high. Flattering the Portuguese, referring to their deeds in India as miraculous, the queen’s ambassador to Goa offered Albuquerque a base on the Red Sea in exchange for assistance against the queen’s domestic enemies. On one hand, such an offer was hard to resist, as it would provide the Portuguese a base of attack on Mecca, as well as furthering the Manueline desire for a reconquest of Jerusalem. Yet it was not a military alliance of two equals, focused on the same, crusading goals. The Portuguese were, again, the distant and powerful ally for which they themselves had been searching.

Manuel’s desire for direct crusade was now not to be a mission undertaken with willing and powerful allies, but an expensive venture without benefit of assistance. By 1520, the situation in the Indian Ocean, therefore, was far different than the Portuguese had anticipated in 1500. While Christians existed in the region, they were neither as politically or economically powerful as had been assumed. Both communities had conflicts with the region’s Muslims, but did not seem particularly willing to participate in any

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79 Matthew proceeded to Lisbon, where he remained for nearly eight years.
expanded global conflict. Both India and Ethiopia were still sources of exotic wonder, as chronicled by explorers, but they were not the grand allies of dream and design. Prester John was, with his Portuguese advisers, more of a client than a full partner. Under siege from indigenous Muslims, the Christian rulers of Ethiopia were forced to call upon the Portuguese for assistance, when the initial Latin plans had been for the reverse.80

As far as the Portuguese were concerned, this was not a political tragedy. While the Ethiopians' ability to conquer geographical distance had been at the root of their perceived power in the West, now the king of Portugal, whose ambassadors, ships and soldiers dotted the known world and carried on regular and profitable commerce over vast distances, had himself conquered geographical distance. The wealth, Christian faith, prophetic claims, and ability to unify many lands under one Christian banner, granted as attributes of Prester John and other potential Eastern allies, were now attributes of the kings of Portugal in their new roles as masters of the Indies. Manuel began to appropriate imperial titles for himself, indicating his sovereignty over greater parts of Africa and Asia.81 Initially, he was the “Lord of the Conquest, and of the navigation and commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia and India.”82 The identification of Manuel as Lord of the Conquest was a title that, after all, had been granted to him by the papal bull Ineffabilis, in 1497, to be recognized before the other princes of Europe.83 By 1505, however, Manuel was being referred to in far grander terms. Valentim Fernandes, in his 1502 Portuguese translation of Marco Polo, noted how the king’s name was known in the most remote regions of the earth. He urged the king to take an imperial title.84 Others called for the king to be recognized

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81 For an extensive discussion of the following, see Thomaz, “L’idée impériale manuéline.” 37-50.
82 “Senhor da conquista e da navegação e comércio de Etiópia, Arábia, Pérsia e da India.” Documentação para a historia das missioes do padroado portugues do Oriente: India, ed. Antonio da Silva Rego, 8 vols (Lisbon, 1946-1958), 1, doc. 2 (pp. 6ff).
84 Marco Paulo—O livro de Marco Paulo—O livro de Nicolau Veneto—A carta de Jeronimo de Santo Estevam . . . , ed. Francisco Maria Esteves Pereira (Lisbon, 1922), prologue.
as Emperor of the Indies, because of the fealty granted him by so many kings of the East. By the time Manuel died in 1521 and was succeeded by John III (r. 1521-1577), the new king was lauded as a “king of many kings.” With such great honor, and without his father’s messianic ambitions regarding Jerusalem, John III displayed none of the enthusiasm for the Eastern alliance, or for the need of Prester John that his predecessors had shown. Prester John had become unnecessary. The Portuguese king now embodied all of those virtues once bestowed only on the greatest princes of the Christian East.

From the time of John’s accession, the Portuguese were keenly aware of their new role in the world. As sovereigns over the Indies they believed themselves in a far superior position to the Christians of Asia and Africa and were quite willing to flex both political and doctrinal muscle to further enhance their power and prestige in the eyes of their clients, Rome and the other Christian princes of Europe. Portugal had displayed a mastery of distance that was unequaled, even by the Spanish with their new discoveries in the West. The establishment of the Portuguese seaborne empire represented a major shift in the distance/power paradigm from one of a Latin sense of dependence upon outside allies to a notion of global supremacy.

The growth and decline of the great Portuguese imperial enterprise marked an important turning point in world history. For the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire, a Western ruler could attempt to base a claim of universal authority on conquest of vast distances and rule over a panoply of hitherto unknown, distant nations and peoples. From this point, Europeans approached the non-European world from a position of assumed supremacy.

The Spanish developed their empire under very different circumstances than the Portuguese. Launching their seaborne empire at a later date than the Portuguese, and doing so among peoples who had lived in complete isolation from the Eurasian world, they approached long-distance diplomacy and distant kingdoms with a benefit of hindsight that their predecessors lacked. Initially, the elements, which had marked earlier searches for a distant ally, coalesced in a new way with the Spanish conquest

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85 As Gavetas da Torre do Tombo, 11 vols, Gulbenkiana, 1, 3, 6-8, 11-14, 16-17 (Lisbon, 1960), 9:50; Albuquerque holds to the same idea, see Antonio Dias Farinha, “A dupla conquista de Ormuz por Afonso de Albuquerque,” Studia 48 (1989), 445ff.
Columbus's search for the western route to China was based on theories about Asia that were, by his time, nearly two centuries old. Columbus was an avid student of Marco Polo, and his written comments on Polo’s text reveal those aspects of the thirteenth-century Venetian’s thought and travels that were of special interest to his Genoese successor. According to Polo, the khans of China had always been inclined toward friendship with Christian rulers, and held a close association with Prester John and a respect for his supposed power. They were rulers of international stature, meant to be approached as equals. Despite the fact that by 1492 the Yüan dynasty and its khans had not ruled China for over a century, the Grand Khan was a clear object of Columbus’s mission, mentioned, as he is, no less than eighteen times in the Columbus’s own journals. While Columbus stated that the conversion of China was his object, an equally persuasive argument could be made for his interest in China’s material wealth. His annotations in his copy of Marco Polo’s text make the connection between gold and power, as food for the soul and body, absolutely explicit. In the

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88 On Prester John and the khâns, see Polo, Il milione, chapters 66–68, 74.
89 William D. Phillips, Jr., “Africa and the Atlantic Islands Meet the Garden of Eden: Christopher Columbus’s View of America,” Journal of World History 3 (1992), 160. In the prologue of the journal of his first voyage, Columbus notes (in a clear reference to his reading of Polo) that the Grand Khan’s predecessors “had [often] sent to Rome to ask for men learned in our Holy Faith” and how Fernando and Isabella “enemies of the false doctrine of Mahomet . . . thought of sending me . . . to the said regions of India to see the said princes . . . and to see how their conversion to our Holy Faith might be undertaken.” See Christopher Columbus, “Carta de Colon a los reyes y diario de a bordo de su primer viaje,” Prologue in Coleccion documental del descubrimiento (1470–1506), 3 vols (Madrid: Real Academia de Historia, 1994), doc. 36 (1:109). For English translation, see Journals and Other Documents on the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus, ed./trans. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York, NY: Heritage Press, 1963), 47–48.
90 Polo, Il milione, 192–197.
context of the Spanish crusading agenda, religion and economic profit were not easily separated.\textsuperscript{91}

While convinced until his death in 1506 that he had been off the Asian coast, if not in sight of the continent itself, he was far less certain that the khan would ever be contacted.\textsuperscript{92} Nevertheless Columbus remained conscious of the monumental possibilities of his discoveries. Not having reached the court of the Grand Khaan, during his third voyage, he boldly declared that he was on the outskirts of the Terrestrial Paradise itself.\textsuperscript{93} Columbus knew the significance of this claim, both for himself and for the monarchs he served. As described by Mandeville and Columbus himself, the Terrestrial Paradise was inaccessible.\textsuperscript{94} Its discovery, therefore, would bring great prestige to its discoverer and his patrons. The discovery (let alone conquest) of the unknown must be considered a greater achievement and representative of a greater terrestrial power than the conquest of a well-known and well-mapped region. By the time of Vespucci’s voyages (1497-1507), the general opinion in Europe was that Columbus had come upon something quite new and distinct.\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{91} Columbus, “Carta de Creencia de Cristobal Colon ante el Gran Kan, Otorgada por los reyes catoloicos,” 30 April 1492, in \textit{Coleccion documental}, doc. 29 (1:89). His search for the khan during his first voyage was concentrated on the north coast of Cuba, where contact with the Carib Indians in late November 1492 led him to believe that he had, in fact, encountered the fierce Chinese soldiers of the Grand Khaan. See Columbus, Diario, 30 October and 26 November 1492. Less than a fortnight later, when on the northwest coast of Hispaniola Columbus wrote that beyond this land was the land of “Caniba” or “canibales,” who were subjects of the “Gran Can.” See Columbus, Diario, 11 December 1492.

\textsuperscript{92} Columbus wrote that he had reached the Chinese province of Mangi (South China) on 13 May 1503, confirming his belief that the island of Cuba was, indeed, the Chinese mainland. See “Carta-Relacion del Cuarto viaje de Cristobal Colon,” in \textit{Coleccion documental}, doc. 615, 11:330. On “Mangi,” see Paul Pelliot, \textit{Notes on Marco Polo}, 3 vols (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1959-1973), 1274-278.

\textsuperscript{93} Columbus, “Carta-Relacion del Almirante a los reyes sobre su tercer viaje,” in \textit{Coleccion documental}, doc. 495, p. 1116; Flint, \textit{Imaginative Landscape}, chapter 5; Delno C. West, “Christopher Columbus, Lost Biblical Sites, and the Last Crusade,” \textit{Catholic Historical Review} 78 (1992), 522f.

\textsuperscript{94} Mandeville, \textit{Travels}, chapter 33.

Columbus, then, had crossed to unknown and distant lands, the very encounter with which imbued both him and the lands with power in Western eyes. Whatever or whoever was to follow in Columbus’s footsteps, the Spanish monarchs could now consider themselves to have achieved what even the Portuguese had been unable to accomplish: possession of the power over the unknown. In addition, if these lands were near the Terrestrial Paradise, the monarchs who were responsible for finding them would fulfill the Joachimite prophecies regarding Castilian divine election.96

If the prophetic power and prestige or the conquest of space were not enough, Columbus was also mindful of the need to discover the wealth associated with the distant, powerful places described by Polo.97 From the first, Columbus emphasized the wealth of the new lands and the uses to which this wealth could be placed.98 If Prester John’s land was not to be found, then the Spanish had the opportunity of fashioning that land in simulacrum. The goals for this new, utopic world had been outlined clearly by Columbus. Spanish imperial policy, whether intentional or not, became geared toward making much of Columbus’s vision a reality.

One aspect that distinguished this new world from the utopia desired by Columbus and Isabel of Castile was religion. American indigenous people were not Christians—a situation he thought needed immediate rectification. He also noted his desire that none but devout Latin Christians should come to these newfound lands.99 This request was to be honored (at least in theory) by the Spanish conquerors who followed Columbus. The insistence upon religious orthodoxy that existed on the Iberian Peninsula was

96 The Spanish mystic Arnau de Villanueva predicted that “he who will restore the ark of Zion will come from Spain,” in Pauline Moffitt Watts, “Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus’s ‘Enterprise of the Indies,’” *American Historical Review* 90 (1985), 94-95. See also *Libro de las profecías*, trans. Delno C. West and August Kling (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1991), 238-239.


98 “And he [Columbus] says that he hopes … that on the return … he would find a barrel of gold … and that they would have found the gold mine … and those things in such quantity that the sovereigns, before three years will undertake and prepare to go conquer the Holy Sepulcher; for thus I urged your Highnesses to spend all the profits of this my enterprise on the conquest of Jerusalem.” Columbus, *Diario*, 26 December 1492, in *Colección documental*, 196; and the translation in *Journals and Other Documents*, ed. Morison, 139.

99 On 27 November 1492, Columbus’s journal notes, “And I say that Your Highnesses ought not to consent that any foreigner do business or set foot here, except Christian Catholics … nor should anyone who is not a good Christian come to these parts.” Columbus, *Diario*, 27 November 1492, in *Colección documental*, 160.
extended to the Spanish possessions overseas. The most direct means of doing this in the New World was the institution of restrictive laws covering immigration to the newly found lands.\(^{100}\) In agreement with Columbus's notes, the Crown issued instructions as early as 1501 to prohibit the entrance of Jews and Muslims into any territories under his jurisdiction.\(^{101}\) King Ferdinand extended this ban in 1513 to include the children and grandchildren of Jews, Muslims, *conversos* and those condemned by the Inquisition.\(^{102}\) This desire for the maintenance of religious purity not only reflected the domestic policy of Spain, but also emphasized the belief that the Spanish Crown had the power to fashion these new found lands to their own design. Special precaution was taken to insure that Muslims, in particular, would not be able to come to the Americas, either in the guise of *conversos* or as slaves. This was a particularly difficult problem, for despite the restrictive measures taken to limit the possibility of a Muslim presence in the Americas, the system was far from foolproof, and throughout the sixteenth century the Crown sought to ensure the religious purity of their newfound world through restrictive immigration legislation.\(^{103}\)

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101 *Provision real prohibiendo ir a descubrir ni a los descubierto, sin licencia de sus altezas,* 3 September 1501, in *Colección documental*, doc. 481.

102 *Trastado de las mercedes, franquezas y libertades que sus altezas concedieron y otorgaron a la isla Española y los vecinos y moradores de ella,* 26 September 1513, in *Colección de documentos para la historia de la formación social de Hispanoamérica, 1493-1830*, ed. Richard Konetzke, 3 vols (Madrid: CSIC, 1953-1962), 159-60.

103 Cardinal Cisneros noted in 1517, for example, that Judaism and Islam were both being practiced in the Spanish Caribbean. See Cisneros grant (22 July 1517) of inquisitorial authority to the bishops of the Indies in J.T. Medina, *La primitiva inquisición americana (1493-1569)*, 2 vols (Santiago de Chile, 1914), 23-5. This was possible in the case of Islam. The number of “Moriscos” who successfully evaded detection and practiced their faith in the New World is unknown. But as late as 1621 in Puebla, a reference to the Moriscos was made in a sermon by Father Juan de Grijalva. See Robert Ricard, “Les Morisques et leur expulsion vus de Mexique,” *Bulletin Hispanique* 33 (1931), 252-254. Eight to ten percent of the fairly small African slave population in Spanish America in the first half of the century were of the Islamicized Malinke from the Gambia River valley. See Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 97-98. The Malinke, converted to Islam in previous centuries, continued the practice of their religion following their capture and enslavement by the Spanish. On Muslim Malinke in Brazil, see Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology on the Interpenetration of Civilizations*, trans. Helen Sebba (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 46. Charles V’s 1522
Attempting to control immigration was one means of developing a Christian empire in the New World to the exclusion of other faiths. Seeking to construct a particular type of Catholicism among the native inhabitants was another. New Christians were not merely expected to know their catechism, but also, as part of the conversion process, the conflict between Muslims and Christians—both in Spain and in the eastern Mediterranean—was incorporated into the most basic teachings that native peoples received from the Spanish. One of the ways in which such ideology was (and is today) presented was through the instructive medium of dance drama, notably the *Moros y Cristianos* (literally, “the Moors and the Christians”).

restrictive immigration legislation requiring recent converts to obtain the acquisition of a royal license before traveling to the Indies, applied to Jews as well as to Muslims. Other, later rulings, were specifically designed to limit Islamic immigration in the persons of African Muslim slaves. See *Recopilación de leyes de los Reynos de las Indias, mandadas imprimier y publicar por le Magestad Católica del Rey don Carlos II*, ed. Juan Manzano Manzano, 4 vols (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1973), 9:26, 15 (3:312). A prime example of this type of ordinance was that issued by Charles in 1530, in which he ruled that any slave found to be a Muslim was to be returned to Africa, and anyone who was found to be importing Morisco slaves was to be heavily fined. See Guevara-Bazan, “Muslim Immigration,” 179-180. The 1522 and 1530 ordinances were reflected in the 1531 decree of Isabella of Portugal, Charles’s wife and regent in Spain, which ruled that Berber slaves could only be brought to the Americas with a special license. See *Cedulario indiano*, compil. Diego de Encinas, ed. Alfonso García Gallo, 5 vols (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1945-1946), 4383. The Emperor renewed the ban against the immigration of *conversos* in 1539. See “R. Provisión que no pasen a Indias ni esten en ellas hijos ni nietos de quemado reconcilando Judias as Moro, ni converso ninguno, 3 October 1539,” in *Colección de documentos*, 1:192-193. And throughout the latter half of the sixteenth century, numerous minor signals were sent to show that the issue of Muslim infiltration was still in the minds of the Spanish monarchs. Vigilance against “prohibidos” is called for by Charles V in 1556 and again by Philip II in 1559, the same year in which the Holy Inquisition was established in Mexico, a further attempt to insure the religious “purity” of the Spaniard’s new world. See documents in *Cedulario indiano*, 1:454-455; 4:374, 381-384.

Originating in Spain, and first performed in the New World in 1539 by indigenous Mexicans under the direction and for the entertainment of Europeans, it portrayed a combat between Muslims and Christians and culminated in the great victory of the Spaniards over the Infidels. The dramas portrayed the Spanish army leading the forces of Christendom, assisted by the army of Mexico on an attack on the Moors. Eventually, with divine intervention and saintly aid, Jerusalem was taken and the sultan and his army converted *en masse* to the True Faith.

Both the enemy and the ally of the Mexican armies are portrayed as being distant from the lands of the Indians, enhancing the power of both the Spanish and the Muslims: these were peoples whose conflicts existed in a part of the world previously unknown to the Nahua, Inka or Visayans who performed the dramas. The power of the Spanish in the dramas can be viewed in light of the prophetic role Cortez and the Spanish claimed to play in Aztec cosmology: the return of Quetzalcoatl or, at very least, the arrival of unknown beings from afar. The Spanish portrayed their martial leadership over a distant army (from Mexico), whose strength, once used against the Latins, was turned against the enemies of Christendom, becoming emblematic of the power of the Spanish king.

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105 Two variations of the theme were presented: the Capture of Rhodes was performed at Mexico City, while a pantomime of the Capture of Jerusalem was presented at Tlaxcala. See Joaquín García Icazbalceta, *Nueva colección de documentos para la historia de México*, 5 vols (Mexico, 1886-1892; reprinted New York, NY, 1971), 325.

106 Toribio de Benavente “Motolinía,” *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*, ed. Daniel Sanchez Garcia (Madrid, 1988), tract 1, chapter 15. Other versions, some portraying Charlemagne’s defeat of Muslim armies at Roncevalles, have also been noted and are still performed. In these, Charlemagne was portrayed as defending the frontiers of Christendom in a manner reminiscent of the Spanish defense of its Central American borderlands. See Italo Morales Hidalgo, *La persistencia de la tradición carolingia en Guatemala y Centro America: un estudio sobre el baile de Carlo Magno y los dos pares de Francia*, Publicación especiales (Instituto Indigenista Nacional), (Guatemala, 1988), 8-9. On the Carolingian theme, see Gisela Beutler, *La historia de Fernando y Alamar: contribución al estudio de las danzas de moros y cristianos en Puebla, Mexico*, Das Mexico Projekt der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft, 19 (Stuttgart, 1984), 23ff. Beutler, *La historia de Fernando*, 179-185, notes the existence of the Carolingian theme throughout Latin America and the Philippines.

107 Spanish reports from Peru imply an awareness among the subjugated Inca leadership of their role in the broader Spanish crusade. López de Gomara reported (and the Christian-Inca Garcilaso de la Vega after him) that Hernan Pizarro ventured to Cuzco in 1534-1535 in order to persuade Manco Inca to “produce a great quantity of gold for the emperor, who was
The issues that thus linked this clearly “new” world to the earlier notions of Prester John’s lands were distance, unity, and strength of arms. As for the first, the desire of the Spanish to maintain the significance of their conquest and accomplishment as a mastery of distance and its concomitant power was, all things considered, rather short lived. The Spanish initially claimed mastery of a distinctly “new” world, but this was a tenuous claim, even from the time of Columbus. From the moment Columbus recognized the humanity of the Indians, he began to lessen the distance and “otherness” between the Spaniards and their newfound land. His journals and letters continuously attempted to relate what he saw to what was already known. A tension arose, therefore, between the effort to make the New World understandable and thus “more Spanish/less other” on one hand, and the power that the Spanish could claim from being masters over something truly different, exotic and foreign, on the other. Charles V became, as Manuel of Portugal did, a great king of many kings, a monarch who, like Prester John, governed the furthest reaches of the world. Yet this claim, too, became something of an empty boast following the French, English, Dutch and Portuguese colonies in the not-so-new world.

The Spanish had other assertions remaining to them, however. Unlike their European counterparts, they could still boast of having defeated the mightiest empires in the Americas. The Spanish chronicles detailing the conquests of the Aztecs and Incas were widely disseminated in the West, describing the wonders of their enemies’ empires and the strength of their

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109 Artists, such as Titian, portrayed Charles V, who ruled simultaneously as king of Spain and as Holy Roman Emperor, as a king upon whose domains the sun never set. See Frances Amelia Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1975), 22. Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, written in 1516, speaks of new worlds, unknown to the ancient Roman emperors, which had been discovered and which served as a portent of a new world monarchy, under Charles V, the *dominus mundi* or Lord of the World. See Lodovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, ed. Cesare Segre, 2 vols, Grandi classici, 5 (Milan: Oscar Mondadori, 1990), 15.21.24.
own armies. These narratives contrasted sharply with the descriptions of disparate small bands of naked “savages” beaten back only with great difficulty by the English, French or Portuguese. A second and perhaps more significant claim for the Spanish was their clear command over the vast newfound material wealth of the Americas, and their use of these precious metals to bring the long-dreaded foes of Christendom, Muslims (in the person of the Ottomans) to their knees, which was, ostensibly, the initial object of Columbus’s first journey. From King Ferdinand’s time (1504-16), the fear of the Turks was a constant call to vigilance in the Americas. However, the possibilities of Muslim incursion in the Americas, which appear intermittently in Spanish reports, were largely fantasies.


113 On the use of Moriscos as Ottoman agents, see Andrew C. Hess, “The Moriscos: An Ottoman Fifth Column in Sixteenth-Century Spain,” American Historical Review 74 (1968), 1-25. Abbas Hamdani stated his belief that it was “likely, therefore, that these Moriscos could have served the same purpose [as Ottoman intelligence agents] in keeping track of the Spanish and Portuguese explorations in the Atlantic.” See Abbas Hamdani, “Ottoman response to the discovery of America and the new route to India,” Journal of the American Oriental Society, 101 (1981), 328-329.

114 On Ottoman interest in the Americas, see [Tarih-i Hind-i garbi] The Ottoman Turks and the New World: A Study of Tarih-i Hind-i Garbi and Sixteenth-Century Ottoman
Unlike the Portuguese, the Spanish were able to express their power through the role that they came to play (or thought they came to play) in the cosmologies of the peoples they encountered. Shortly after the point of initial contact in Mexico between Hernán Cortes (1485-1547) and the Nahua king Moctezuma II (ca. 1480-1520), Cortes wrote to Charles V, claiming that the Aztec ruler had declared that the conquistador was the emissary of a god-king, whose return had been long prophesied and who would come to rule over the Aztec empire.115 Similar stories, relating how Maya and Inca rulers and peoples came to identify the Spanish with prophesied returning kings, also appear shortly after initial contact.116 Recent scholarship has begun to dispute these early claims focusing on documents preserved, not in Spanish, but in indigenous languages. The Nahua did impute great power to the Spanish because of their arrival from a great distance, but as men, not gods. Nahua belief associated the Spanish with a place farther away from the Valley of Mexico than even the Aztecs’ ancient ancestors had come.117 They did not, however, have a preexistent belief in a prophetic history regarding a returning king. The Spanish first voiced this idea, and the god/king Quetzalcoatl was only transformed into a figure who

115 See his second letter in Cortés, Letters from Mexico, 85f, 467ff., n.42.
returns from afar to liberate his people after Cortes and the Spanish begin to chronicle their own deeds. The Spanish, through a process of “double mistaken identity,” found a means of creating a new Nahua cosmology in which they claimed a central part.\textsuperscript{118} Second generation Nahua sources regarding the relationship between the Spanish and Quetzalcoatl were very vague in their Nahuatl originals and did not place the foreigners in any form of divine plane, even while contemporary Spanish translations of the same documents imply that the connection is quite clear.\textsuperscript{119} Only after the point of contact did Nahua cosmology develop the hope of a redeemer from afar who would change the course of Mexican history. For their part, the Spanish and the post-contact Mexican historiographic tradition assumed that the Aztecs had made the Quetzalcoatl/Cortes connection at the point of contact, rather than a generation afterward. The situation in the Yucatan, at the time of Spanish–Maya initial contact was fuzzier still. Unlike the Nahua, the Maya did have a preexistent prophetic historical tradition. It is possible, therefore, that Cortes, whose first encounters on the Mexican shore were with Mayas in 1519, had conflated Nahua and Maya belief systems. Scholars have questioned the blanket Mayan acceptance of Spanish divinity noting, as with the Nahua, that the Cakchiquel Mayans, for example, only referred to the foreigners as dzules (people from afar) as opposed to imputing to them any godly status as their Quiché neighbors did.\textsuperscript{120} A similar split is present in Inca cosmography. The partisans of Atahuallpa never assumed Spanish divinity, while their rivals, the partisans of Manco Inca, referred to the Spanish as akin to Viracocha, the god(s) who will return from afar to establish order and righteousness.\textsuperscript{121}

Whatever the accuracy of Spanish interpretations of their place in indigenous American cosmologies, they had little time to claim their divinity


\textsuperscript{119} According to Lockhart [“Sightings”], the first half of the oft-cited Book 12 of the Florentine Codex records post-conquest ideologies while the second half of the book has an earlier provenance.

\textsuperscript{120} For the Cakchiquel interpretation, see The Book of Chilam Balam de Chumayel. For that of the Quiché, see Memorial de Sololá, anales de los Cakchiqueles, ed. Adrián Recinos (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1950).

\textsuperscript{121} For the former interpretation, see Tragedia del fin de Atahuallpa, trans./ed. Jesús Lara (Cochabamba: La Casa del Libro, 1957), 86-88. For the latter, see Titu Cusi Yupangui Diego de Castro, Relación de la Conquista del Perú y Hechos del Inca Manco II (Lima: Imprenta y Librería San Martí, 1916), 8-9.
before their behavior betrayed their human identity. However, having staked a place in native cosmology and consequently a level of cosmological power based on an interpretation of native views of distant kingdoms, the Spanish needed to develop some explanation that would continue to point to their presence as cosmologically significant. The presence of pre-Columbian Christianity in the Americas was a logical means of achieving this explanation. The notion that the natives of the Americas had been introduced to the Gospel before 1492 allowed the Spanish arrival to take on the aura of a destiny fulfilled. By stating that the Nahua, Maya or Inca god/ kings, whose return was prophesied, were Biblical figures, Christian missionaries could place themselves and their faith within the context of pre-existing paradigms. Both the Spanish and the Portuguese developed rather elaborate explanations of and proof for the existence of pre-Colombian Christianity in their American colonies. Such theories were largely

122 See n. 111 above.

123 Some argued that the natives were descended from the Jews. According to one Franciscan, this necessitated their immediate conquest in order to hasten the second coming, in accordance with the prophecies regarding the gathering in of the Jewish tribes. See John Leddy Phelan, *The Millenial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1956), 24-25; Lee Eldridge Huddleston, *Origins of the American Indians: European Concepts, 1492-1729*, Latin American Monographs 11 (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1967); The Franciscan Gerónimo de Mendieta noted the parallels between the Aztec Quetzalcoatl and the Jewish notion of the Messiah, claiming that the Aztecs were descended from Jews exiled by Vespasian and Titus. See *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, ed. Francisco Solano y Pérez, 2 vols, Biblioteca des auctores españoles (Madrid: Atlas, 1973), 2:32. Others insisted that the apostles, notably Saint Thomas, must have preached the gospel in the Americas—speaking to the true Christian lineage of (and consequently, the Christian right to) the new found lands. See, generally, Louis-André Vigneras, “Saint Thomas, Apostle of America,” *Hispanica American Historical Review* 57 (1977), 82-90.

repudiated, however, and it was not a theme adopted by many missionaries, who often chose to present Christianity as a clear break with past beliefs and in 1551, the Church officially denied any early apostolic presence in the New World. The continuation of such myths for several centuries throughout the Spanish lands testifies to their continuing importance to Spanish self-image.

By insisting upon their own place in native cosmologies, the Spanish were able to create for themselves the aura of divinity. Their place of origin alone might have been enough to grant them respect or power in the eyes of the peoples they encountered. Yet, the Spanish were able to do far more. While the size and scope of their military and economic conquests were

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125 Ricard, Spiritual Conquest, 33–35.

126 Primer Concilio Provincial Limenses, prologue, in Concilios limenses (1551-1772), ed. Ruben Vargas Ugarte, 3 vols (Lima: Tipografía Peruana, 1951-1954); Juan de Solorzano Pereira, Política Indiana, 5 vols (Madrid: Biblioteca Castro, 1972-1975), 1.8.30. The Inkan-Christian chronicler Guaman Poma, writing in 1615, noted that the first generation of Andean humanity, "Vari Viracocha Runa," unlike the Inka, were descended from original man. It followed then that the Spanish invasion was a justifiable restoration of the original, true religion of the people. See Guaman Poma de Ayala, Nueva crónica, 378 [380]. As late as 1794, the Mexican Dominican preacher Fray Servando Teresa de Mier preached that Viracocha and Thomas were one and the same. See Benjamin Keen, The Aztec Image in Western Thought (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971), 304.
clearly designed to impress their Christian rivals with the “power” of the new lands they had conquered, through the formulation and dissemination of a syncretic native-Spanish interpretation of their own arrival they were also able to transform Spain into a place of untold distant power in the minds of the vanquished, indigenous peoples of the Americas. Whether the Terrestrial Paradise lay on the western or eastern shores of the Atlantic Ocean, the Spanish could claim possession of both.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century the classical, late-antique, and medieval mythology-based distance–power paradigms had all but fallen away. No longer concerned with the potential “power” of those whom they might encounter over the horizon, European imperial power had developed a sense of its own superiority, and imagined the power and awe with which other peoples held them. In essence, they became aware, as the Spanish first had, of their place in the cosmologies and mythologies of other peoples and states, and proceeded to exploit this role to full economic, spiritual and political advantage. By 1600, there was little need for an Eastern ally. The Ottoman fleet had been defeated at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, and whatever image of Ottoman invincibility that had previously existed in the West was temporarily torn asunder.127 Rather than any ideal of a military alliance of equals, any future allies would be those who might be able to furnish the powers of the West with the economic power, traded goods, exploitable natural resources or large markets, which were seen as pivotal to defeating the Turks. In the face of a Turkish resurgence in the mid-seventeenth century, new military technologies and techniques, ranging from increasingly accurate guns to the use of well-trained professional soldiers, largely eliminated the perceived need for distant allies.128 The use of mythological constructs in long-range diplomatic contacts became increasingly meaningless as those regions of the world left unexamined and unexplored by Westerners rapidly decreased in number. The distances, which had been something of a progenitor of the mythologies of otherness, had greatly shrunk. The Spanish had gone so far as to proclaim their own divine place in the cosmology of those they had conquered. This level of self-awareness and self-confidence marked a clear, paradigmatic shift from

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a European sense of dependency on outside powers to a clear and unquestioned sense of global mastery.

Despite the warning of Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau who cautioned against feeling too superior in light of the simple nobility of the “savage” races, claims of technological, scientific and military prowess came to dominate Western proofs of their own superiority.¹²⁹ It would only be among chiliastic millennialists, romantics, and their successors, whose search for hidden Rousseau-esque utopias in light of perceived Western moral and spiritual corruption, that the older, mythologies would survive intact. Such myths of the spiritual purity of the lost tribes of Israel, remote Indian tribes living among the golden streets and palaces of El Dorado, Pacific havens of peace, King Solomon’s mines, or perhaps more significantly, Tibet, continued well into the twentieth century.¹³⁰ Europeans could now claim that they were, in fact, the possessors of the power of distance they had once coveted from afar.
