Introduction: Ethiopia, Prester John and the Portuguese Empire

Scholars have generally disregarded the history of early modern Portuguese imperial thought. While a dozen scattered articles deal with particular aspects, there is no book about the subject as a whole.* At the same time, international historiography over the last two decades has been characterized by an outstanding production of comparative studies about theories of empire, in which surprisingly little attention is paid to the Portuguese case.¹ This chapter aims to focus on the special role played by Ethiopia in the making of a public image of the Portuguese overseas expansion during the sixteenth century. By ‘public image’ I mean the official representation of the main purposes of the Portuguese Empire, closely related to the means used to achieve them. I stress that at the beginning of the sixteenth century there were competing ideas about the Portuguese Empire: Ethiopia was a sensitive prism of the tensions concerning the framework of the overseas power, its organization and administration. Indeed, in Renaissance Portugal the public image of Ethiopia shifted over the course of time. More precisely, the controversial interpretations of the place occupied by the encounter with Ethiopia and its inhabitants in the evolution of the Portuguese Empire disguised another, no less vibrant debate about the colonial experience itself. The importance of Ethiopia is especially clear since it was the only subject on which vernacular writings pertaining to Portuguese imperial literature were published in the first half of the sixteenth century.

* See now my book L’invenzione di un impero. Politica e cultura nel mondo portoghese (Rome: 2011), which was published after submitting this chapter.
A mythic land between Christendom and Islam, Ethiopia had stood at the core of the justification of Portuguese overseas expansion since the mid-fifteenth century. The awareness of and interest in a remote Christian empire, surrounded by Muslim enemies, was reinforced by the identification of its sovereign, the negusa nagast (‘king of kings’), with the legendary Prester John, a charismatic figure of medieval European legend. As was the case of many other real or invented personalities in the Middle Ages, two contrasting traditions referred to Prester John: mentioned for the first time in a twelfth-century Latin letter, this singular name did not refer to a priest, but rather to the overpowering lord of a great and marvellous Christian realm somewhere in the East, protected by an immense army. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, a new and more elaborate version of the story was propagated by Marco Polo’s Il Milione: Prester John’s fantastic kingdom did really exist in Asia, but it had been reduced in size after its king was killed in battle by his former vassals, the Tartars led by Gengis Khan.2

The legend of Prester John lived on through Marco Polo. Known as ‘Prester John of the Indies’, this title contributed to the realization of what has been called the ‘Ethiopian destiny’ of this imaginary sovereign.3 Rumours spread the notion that ‘Ethiopia’, a generic name known since Antiquity, corresponded to a Christian land in the East.4 Moreover, the geographers of the late Middle Ages used to associate Ethiopia with the ‘Middle Indies’. All these factors helped to keep Prester John alive: in fifteenth-century Europe he was often confused with the Emperor of Ethiopia.

The wars of conquest against the Muslims in North Africa, as well as the growing power of the Ottoman Empire, made Prester John (and the opportunity of alliance with his Christian troops) a perfect myth for Portuguese expansion. Copies of the letter of Prester John circulated in mid-fifteenth-century Portugal, and considering that the papal bull Romanus Pontifex (1455) granted the Crown an unheard-of authority over lands and seas from Cape Bojador ‘to the Indians’

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