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Fancy Names and Fake News: notes on the conflation of Solomonic Ethiopian rulership with the myth of Prester John in late medieval Latin Christian diplomatic correspondence

Verena Krebs

In 1402, the first official diplomatic embassy sent out from Solomonic Ethiopia arrived in Venice.¹ It was the first of many such ventures over the course of the century: some twenty-two Ethiopian missions to Latin Europe are attested to between 1402 and 1543, with at least nineteen Ethiopian delegations succeeding in reaching the courts of Western Europe in the 15th century alone.² When these Ethiopian embassies arrived on the northern shores of the Mediterranean, however, they were not necessarily perceived by Latin Christian contemporaries as having been despatched by Solomonic *nägäšt* such as *aše* Dawit or *aše* Zär'a Ya'eqob. For instance, all documents relating to the 1402 Ethiopian embassy to Venice – from private citizens' correspondence to official records by the Repub-

¹ This article is based on a talk I gave at the 2016 *Orbis Aethiopicus* conference held from 04.–06. November 2016 in Weimar, Germany. I thank Friederike Pfister and Adam Simmons for their critique of early versions of the text, and their patience in proofreading the final version.

In a recent article, I have examined the evidence for the supposed 1306 'Ethiopian' embassy at Genoa, which had supposedly visited the 'king of the Spains' as well as the pope in Avignon. While there is intriguing new evidence that Latin Christians – particularly in Italy – might have gleaned actual information on the Ethiopian Solomonic realm by the early 14th century, the sources do not support the long-held belief of scholarship in an early 14th-century mission by an unknown Ethiopian king. For my in-depth evaluation of evidence for the 1306 embassy, see (Krebs 2019a). For new evidence on Latin Christian knowledge in the early 14th century and possible informal connections between the Latin West and Ethiopia, see (Bausi and Chiesa 2019; Chiesa 2018).

² Conversely, the first successful Latin Christian mission to the Solomonic court that subsequently returned to Europe dates to the third decade of the 16th century. For a detailed analysis, see (Krebs 2014). I am currently finishing two monographs related to the subject matter, one of which will examine the Ethiopian diplomatic approach towards Western Europe in the 15th and early 16th century in detail while the other looks at concurrent Ethiopian courtly patronage practices of 'foreign' material culture and the import and even commissioning of religious objects from Latin Europe.

lic of Venice itself – state that it had been *prete Jane*,³ *Prestozone*,⁴ *prete Janni*⁵ and *domini Presti Zane domini Indie*⁶ – and thus the ‘Lord Prester John, Lord of the Indies’ – who had sent his delegates to Venice. Not a single Latin source of 1402 mentions *aṣe* Dawit II, the Solomonic Ethiopian sovereign who had, in fact, despatched the embassy. A close reading of Latin Christian diplomatic correspondence relating to these late medieval embassies reveals this as a recurring pattern: the overwhelming majority of European sources perceived Solomonic missions of the 15th and early 16th century as having been sent by ‘Prester John’ from his ‘Indian’ realm. Actual Solomonic *näḡāst* were identified by their proper names comparatively rarely – and even if their given or regnal names are stated, they are consistently accompanied by the *title* of ‘Prester John’.

One might discount this conflation simply as a medieval Latin idiosyncrasy – but words, and names, have meaning. Within late medieval Europe, the appellation of ‘Prester John’ connoted more than just a name or title – it conjured up a whole mythology about a formidable Christian ruler of extraordinary military power, a priest-king ruling justly over an awe-inspiring and paradisiac realm of seemingly boundless riches beyond the Muslim world.⁷ This realm, meanwhile, was located somewhere in the great but vaguely defined land of ‘India’ – the all-encompassing Latin term of the ‘unknown world beyond the Islamic territories of the Near East’,⁸ conceptualized as stretching from today’s West Africa to the Far East in the Latin Christian imagination of the late Middle Ages.⁹ While the geographically similarly vague term ‘Ethiopia’ and equally imprecise notions about ‘Ethiopians’ had been present in Latin Christian writing since the earliest

3 Francesco Novello da Carrara to Francisco de Priulis and Paulo Mauroceno on the 26th of June 1402; Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Ms. lat. XIV, 93 = 4530, fol. 64r; ed. in (Pastorello 1915, 260).

4 Records of the Great Council of Venice, 22nd of July 1402; Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Magg. Cons. Deliberazioni A, fol. 21r.

5 Inventory list for the sanctuary of St. Mark in Venice, 1402; Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Ms. it. VII, nr. 374, coll. 7781, fol. 40; ed. in (Gallo 1967, 288).

6 Records of the Venetian Senate, 10th of August 1402; Archivio di Stato Venezia, Senato Misti, reg. XLVI, fol. 36v and letter of Michele Steno to the Duke of Candia, 26th August 1402; Archivio di Stato Venezia, Duca di Candia, Ms. 1, fol. 1v; ed. in (Thieriet 1978, sec. 7).

7 Compare for instance (Silverberg 1972; Knobler 2017).

8 (Brewer 2015, 23).

9 This ‘India’ encompassed in different variations the realms the *Bilād al-Sūdān*, the Horn of Africa, Southern Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the Persian Gulf, the Indian sub-continent and at times even the island countries further east, i.e. Indonesia; see (Knefelkamp 1999) and (O’Doherty 2013).

days of the religion,¹⁰ the association of an African Christian realm such as that of Solomonic Ethiopia with that of 'Prester John of India' was a comparatively late development: as this article shows, only by the mid-14th century – nearly two centuries after the original inception of the myth – did the location of Prester John's 'Indian' empire progressively shift from Asia to North-East Africa in the Latin Christian imagination.¹¹ Significantly, this shift occurred in the decades leading up to the onset of Solomonic diplomatic outreach to the Latin West from the early 15th century onwards.

A look at the sources for this early case of long-distance diplomacy shows what Latin Christians desired most from their Ethiopian counterparts were military alliances.¹² Throughout the 15th and early 16th century, Western princely rulers, as well as ecclesiastical potentates, were hoping for either Ethiopian monetary support or even an actual shared crusade in the Eastern Mediterranean. This article aims to shed some light on the interplay between the progressive conflation of Solomonic kingship with indigenous Latin Christian traditions relating to Prester John in the late Middle Ages. After looking at early descriptions of Ethiopia and Ethiopians in Latin sources, the article examines how Latin authors gradually began to conflate the empire of Prester John with that of Solomonic Ethiopia – and how ideas originally ascribed onto the mythical Prester John were increasingly ascribed to the *nägäšt* of Solomonic Ethiopia. A subsequent evaluation of names and titles used in 15th and early 16th century Latin correspondence directed at the rulers of Solomonic Ethiopia will reveal that this conflation appears to have been both immediate and tangible for contemporaries; moreover, the last section of the article examines how actual Ethiopian ambassadors appear to have – either intentionally or not – freely contributed to the fanciful Latin conflation of the Solomonic *näguś* with the mythical Prester John. I argue that the gradual conflation of the myth of Prester John with Solomonic Ethiopian Christian rulership from the mid-14th century thus laid the groundwork for Latin Christian interests in Ethiopia prior to the actual onset of Ethiopian-European diplomacy, eventually shaping the idea of Solomonic Ethi-

¹⁰ Beginning with the figure of the Ethiopian eunuch in the New Testament, who was baptized by Saint Philip the Evangelist on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza in Acts 8:26–40.

¹¹ For its African context and a bibliography on the myth's application to Christian Ethiopia, see (Relaño 2002; Fiaccadori 2010; Cardini 2014). On the movement of Prester John within the European imagination, see (Rouxpetel 2014).

¹² Ethiopian rulers, meanwhile, were primarily interested in acquiring craftsmen and artisans, see (Krebs 2014). My forthcoming monograph will offer an in-depth study of these interests, which were primarily related to changes in religious and courtly culture as well as the local ecclesiastical and political landscape from the reign of *aṣe* Dawit II onwards.

opia as a uniquely desirable military partner in Latin Europe – an idea that significantly impacted the course of Ethiopian-European late medieval diplomacy well into the 16th century.

Ethiopia in early Latin Christian accounts and the advent of Prester John

As mentioned above, imprecise and geographically similarly vague notions on 'Ethiopia' and 'Ethiopians' had existed in Latin Christian writing since the earliest days of the religion, beginning with the New Testament story of Saint Philip the Evangelist baptizing an 'Ethiopian' eunuch on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza.¹³ Early Latin travel accounts demonstrate a marked lack of surprise when it comes to descriptions of Ethiopia and Ethiopians particularly – although the latter term often served as an ambiguous expression that could denote any dark-skinned African instead of someone from medieval Ethiopia as it is now conceived of in Ethiopian Studies.¹⁴ In the early 8th century, Willibald, the Anglo-Saxon bishop of Eichstätt in Bavaria,¹⁵ mentions in his travel account that he had encountered an 'Ethiopian' while travelling through the Plain of Esdraelon¹⁶ in the Holy Land. He states that from Jerusalem his group 'travelled on across a

¹³ Acts 8:26–40.

¹⁴ Since the conversion of the Aksumite kings in the first half of the 4th century, a Christian realm was situated in parts of what is now the State of Eritrea and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Originally centred in the northern section of the North-Eastern highland plateau in the vicinity of the eponymous city of Aksum, its geographical and political centre shifted southwards during the subsequent rules of the Zagwe Dynasty (11th–13th century) and the Solomonic Dynasty (from 1270 onwards). Within Ethiopian Studies, Ethiopia tends to signify the whole country, including its claimed historical territories; Abyssinia, derived from Gə'əz Ḥabašāt, Amharic/Tigrinya Ḥabäša, and classical Arabic al-Ḥabaša, meanwhile designates the predominantly Christian and Semitic highlands. For an overview of the terms and their origins, see (Voigt 2003). On the historical geography of Ethiopia, see (Huntingford 1989). For Aksum, the Zagwe, and Solomonic Dynasty, see (Munro-Hay 2003; Facciadori 2015; Kaplan 2010) for further references.

¹⁵ 700–787, pilgrim to the Holy Land in the 720s. Most of the information on Willibald's life comes from the *Hodoeporicon of Saint Willibald*, a contemporary autobiographical text dictated shortly before his death to an Anglo-Saxon nun; ed. in (Willibald of Eichstätt 1877). A more recent new edition and translation to German is to be found in (Koppitz 2011).

¹⁶ The Jezreel Valley in the Lower Galilee region of modern-day Israel, west of the Jordan Valley. The former name 'Plain of Esdraelon' is derived from a Greek rendering of Jezreel.

wide plain full of olive-trees, and there went with them an Ethiopian with two camels and a mule, who conducted a woman through the woods.¹⁷

For Willibald, seeing an 'Ethiopian' Christian appears to have been of rather limited surprise. He does not elaborate on it. Instead, the truly memorable event was a subsequent encounter the group had with a lion, which 'terrified them greatly' – whereupon 'that Ethiopian said to them "Fear you not, but go on."' Bolstered by this pronouncement, the group rallied and persevered – and then 'the lion, by the disposition of the Almighty God enthroned on high, quickly turned another way', leaving the path clear for them to pass.¹⁸ Although the lion scares them with its roar, all members of the party travelling together survive unscathed. It is not the appearance of the Ethiopian itself that made the event worthy of being retold in Willibald's travelogue; instead, the focus is on the Ethiopian's action, his capacity of calming the other travellers down, thereby ensuring that none of the pilgrims ended up a carnivore's dinner.

In a similarly dispassionate way, a Saxon Pilgrim to the Levant relates news about the – in this case far more specific – Christians of Ethiopia to his Central European audience in the early 13th century: in 1217, the German pilgrim Thietmar journeyed to the Holy Land and penned a travelogue of his adventures and observations. Following some comments on Eastern Christians, particularly on the Copts of Egypt, Thietmar writes:

there is, indeed, also a country beyond Egypt, whose inhabitants are called Issini. And it is wholly Christian. And it is that every person in those provinces has a cross on their foreheads, because, when they are born, they are cauterized on their foreheads in the sign of the cross.¹⁹

He further states that these 'Issini' were in the habit of attacking the Muslim Egyptians and that they were a force to be reckoned with. Should these Ethiopians – for as such should this rather obvious corruption of *Abissini*²⁰ be understood – ever decide to attack 'Babylon'²¹ in the time to come, Thietmar mused, then not a single stone would remain in its place.²²

Eighty years after Thietmar's pilgrimage to the Holy Land, one of the first European far-distance travellers to reach contemporary fame, the Venetian Mar-

¹⁷ Ed. in (Willibald of Eichstätt 1877, 100); transl. in (Willibald of Eichstätt 1897, 26–27).

¹⁸ Ed. in (Willibald of Eichstätt 1877, 100); transl. in (Willibald of Eichstätt 1897, 27).

¹⁹ (Thietmar 1857a, 49).

²⁰ Possibly a copying mistake due to the 'ab' being mistaken for a Latin preposition, i.e. *Abissini* copied as *ab Issini*.

²¹ Yet another vague placeholder for a city under Muslim sovereignty used predominantly for Cairo in late medieval writing.

²² (Thietmar 1857a, 49).

co Polo, found himself down on his luck. During his incarceration in a prison in rivalling Genoa, he dictated an account of his journeys to East Asia and reports on a number of other places to a fellow prisoner, the Pisan romance writer Rustichello.²³ In a similar fashion to Thietmar, he adds some hearsay to the account of his own travels, introducing his audience to 'Abasce, which is called Ethiopia'. This Abasce or Ethiopia is described as a

very great province which is called the middle or second Indie because it is between the greater and the less, and firm land [...] you may know indeed that the greatest king of all this province is Christian and all the other kings of the province are subject to him, and they are six kings and six kingdoms very large [...] three of them Christians and three Saracens.²⁴

There, he was told, that

all the Christian people [...] have three golden marks on their faces in form of a cross that they may be known as more noble by others, that is one on the forehead, the two others on the cheeks [...] these marks are made with hot iron, and they make them when they are small, and it is for their second baptism with fire [...] and it is regarded as for great gentility and they say for completion of the baptism, and also because it contributes much to their health.²⁵

²³ Rustichello da Pisa, also known as Rusticiano and Rustigielo, writer of the late 13th century. The exact textual tradition of Polo's narrative is of little importance to this study; more noteworthy appears that although historiography on Ethiopia credits Marco Polo's well-known account of the early 14th century as the first Western description of Ethiopia, it was Thietmar who offered an account on Ethiopia to the Western reader some good forty years before Marco Polo was born. Polo's description of Ethiopia or 'Abasce' appears in Book 3, Chapter 35 (Polo 1938, 434–40).

²⁴ (Polo 1938, 434–35).

²⁵ (Polo 1938, 435). This practice was also mentioned by Thietmar, who states that not long after birth, these *Issini* Christians were cauterized on their foreheads with a sign of the cross (Thietmar 1857b, 49). Both are describing a well-attested-to Ethiopian Christian cultural practice; ritual scarification and tattooing are still practiced in Ethiopia; particularly in the northern highlands, it remains common to see Christian crosses scarred or tattooed onto forehead, hands or lower arms as a sign of faith; see (Klemm 2003).

Marco Polo's journey east coincided for the most part with the emergence of the Solomonic royal dynasty in Ethiopia. News of the change in politics and the ensuing struggle to consolidate the new dynasty within the geopolitical expanse of the Horn of Africa had obviously made their way beyond the Red Sea region in the late 13th century, as he furthermore states:

The great Christian king of the whole province, to whom all the rest are subjects, dwells indeed in the middle of the said province, but the Saracens dwell towards the province of Aden. [...] And you may know that in this province of Abasce are many very good men of arms and very fine horsemen enough, and they also have horses enough. And this is quite necessary to them for you may know that they always have great war with the sultan of Aden and with those of Nubie and with the other people who are on their borders. Through their continual exercise they are counted the best men of war of all the provinces of Indie.²⁶

One particular and striking description of a near-contemporary battle is related in great detail by Polo: in the year 1288, 'this king who is lord of the whole province of Abasce, who is a Christian',²⁷ had considered a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, purportedly to assuage his soul. His great courtiers dissuaded him from undertaking this risk and advised him to send one of his ecclesiastics to do the pilgrimage in his stead. Accordingly, a 'bishop who was reckoned a man of very holy and good life'²⁸ was sent with many rich gifts to the community of his countrymen at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in a manner that 'befitted a bishop'.²⁹ On the way back he was captured and severely mistreated by the troops of the 'Sultan of Aden'³⁰ before being allowed to proceed. When the Christian king of 'Abasce' became aware of this news, the situation quickly deteriorated into violence: the Christian king immediately gave orders to assemble 'a very exceedingly great

²⁶ (Polo 1938, 435–36).

²⁷ (Polo 1938, 436).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ That Aden is a catch-all for the different Muslim principalities fringing the Highlands of the Horn of Africa is clear in Polos following description of 'the Province of Aden', which states that the people and merchants of Aden would import their goods via sea, and load it on camels to transport it towards the Nile, i.e. being located on the western side of the Red Sea and hence on the African continent, supplemented by the earlier remark that the province of Aden was located near 'the Christian province of Abascia', as 'Abasce' is also sometimes given; see (Polo 1938, 440–43). In 1288, the Walasma' dynasty of Ifat conquered the town of 'Adal' after which the region was later named.

people, of knights and of men on foot, [...] and when he was well arrayed with all his people he set himself on the way [...] to the kingdom of Aden.³¹ In the ensuing battle, the 'Saracens' could not 'resist the great force of the king of the province of Abasce, because he had many people' and good fighters, as 'Christians are worth much more than the Saracens are worth'. Therefore, the 'Saracens were turned away back in flight, and the king of the Christians with all his men enter[ed] into the kingdom of Aden by force', staying over a month and 'destroyed it for many days, setting all on fire', and putting 'a very great multitude of Saracens to death', in order to avenge the 'shame of his bishop',³² a rightful act, as

the bishop was well and highly avenged on those Saracen dogs, for indeed so many of them were dead and killed that the number could hardly be told, and many lands also were wasted and destroyed [...] for it is not a fit thing that the Saracen dogs must be superior to the Christians.³³

Polo's overall narration on 'Abasce' is a contemporary account for the reign of *aše* Yagba Šəyon,³⁴ second ruler of the Solomonic Dynasty: documentary evidence exists that Yagba Šəyon sent messengers to Egypt for a new bishop and messages and gifts to the Ethiopian monastery at Jerusalem at exactly this time.³⁵ The description of the fight between the Ethiopian *nəguś* and the 'Sultan of Adal' was clearly both gripping and entertaining enough to lend itself to an elaborate retelling in the Red Sea region, only to be overheard by Polo – whose account became so popular this story was arguably re-told all over south-western Europe by the early 14th century. Beyond the exciting battle exploits and bloodshed, Polo's more general account on the country of Abasce remains as slim as can be expected from someone who never travelled there himself. He states that the 'province aforesaid of Abasce is very rich and greatly abounding in all the things of life', that there are 'many cities and villages in this province' as well as 'many merchants who live by trade, and craftsmen'. Lastly, as is usual in his account, Polo refers to the textiles of the region – 'many beautiful cloths of gold and of

³¹ (Polo 1938, 436).

³² (Polo 1938, 436–37).

³³ (Polo 1938, 437).

³⁴ Son of the founder of the Solomonic Dynasty, *aše* Yəkunno Amlak. He was *nəguś* of Ethiopia from 1285–1294.

³⁵ (Munro-Hay 2006, 87); Cerulli has published parts of the letter of *aše* Yagba Šəyon in his source compendium *Etiopi in Palestina* (Cerulli 1943, 88–90).

cotton and buckram cloths³⁶ that were 'made there in very great quantity' before stating that the province was 'most exceedingly rich in gold'.³⁷

Until the second quarter of the 14th century, these and other descriptions³⁸ of Ethiopia are thus rather factual in their way of referring to medieval Ethiopia and Ethiopians: it is the kingdom of the 'Issini', the 'Abissini', the 'people of Abasce', and the 'Ethiopians', a realm of African Christians located in a specific region of the vast and geographically hazy part of the world – at least to medieval European audiences – described as 'India'.

Less than forty years after Marco Polo, we can observe a gradual but fundamental shift in the European imagination of this realm. The Dominican Jordanus Catalani³⁹ was among the first to present his readers with a slightly different vision of Ethiopia in an extensive travelogue compiled around the year 1330. Jordanus was one of the most important 14th-century missionaries to India; he had himself sailed around the Horn of Africa. Some of his descriptions of places, customs, flora, and fauna are occasionally precise and endearingly enthusiastic. While he freely admits that he had never been to Ethiopia,⁴⁰ he includes information on this country in his account, which he presents as a place of marvels:

There are many monsters there, such as gryphons that guard the golden mountains, which be there. [...] There, too, are very many precious stones. The lord of that land I believe to be more potent than any man in the world, richer in gold and silver and in precious stones. He is said to have under him fifty-two kings, rich and potent. He rules over all his neighbours towards the south and west. In this Ethiopia there are two burning mountains, and between them a mountain of gold. The people of the country are all Christians, but heretics. I have seen and known many folk

³⁶ Today a very sturdy type of cotton cloth; its medieval equivalent 'bokeram' was considered a fine and costly cloth for curtains, bedspreads and banners in medieval Europe.

³⁷ (Polo 1938, 440).

³⁸ Compare i.e. the accounts of Roger of Wendover, Burchard of Mount Sion, Hayton of Corycus, Guillaume Adam and many others writing for a Latin Christian audience up to the end of the 13th and beginning of the 14th century. All their passages on Ethiopia have been collected by Cerulli in his source compendium *Etiopi in Palestina*; see (Cerulli 1943).

³⁹ Also known as Jordanus de Severac, Dominican missionary and explorer in Asia, first Catholic bishop on the Indian subcontinent. His life-dates are not well documented and are approximated as 1290–1336.

⁴⁰ (Jordanus 1863, 46).

from those parts. To that emperor the Soldan of Babylon⁴¹ giveth every year 500,000 ducats of tribute as it is said.⁴²

This realm of wonders and unbridled Christian power was located south of Egypt, close to a place where 'certain animals like an ass, but with transverse stripes of black and white, such as that one stripe is black and the next white'⁴³ could be found, matching the actual geographic vicinity of Solomonic Ethiopia. Jordanus' Ethiopia thus might have corresponded with the location of Solomonic Ethiopia, but to his contemporaries, the place he described first and foremost must have evoked quite a different kingdom: the empire of the mythical Prester John. Jordanus himself confirms this transposition, and bluntly states to his readers that he is speaking about the realm of '[...] the emperor of the Ethiopians, whom you call Prestre Johan.'⁴⁴

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, the appellation of 'Prester John' connoted more than just a name or title in late medieval Europe – instead, it invoked a specific set of beliefs and ideas about a ruler and his realm that had fuelled the Latin Christian imagination for centuries. From the mid-12th century, tales about a Christian king living beyond the countries of the Muslims as well as subsequent letters purportedly written by this same sovereign began to circulate in the Eastern Mediterranean and Europe.⁴⁵ In Latin Europe especially, Prester John was imagined as a mighty Christian ruler of extraordinary military power, ruling peacefully over a paradisiac realm of seemingly boundless riches.⁴⁶ Some of the most famous literary and intellectual figures of the 13th and 14th centuries – from Marco Polo, William of Rubruck and Jordanus de Severac to Roger Bacon, John Mandeville and John of Hildesheim⁴⁷ – wrote about this mysterious priest-king. His realm, meanwhile, remained hard to pinpoint: it was located somewhere in the great but vaguely defined land of 'India', a catch-all term that could include territories from south of the Sahara to the Far East.⁴⁸ The timing of the inception of the myth had been no coincidence: through the Crusades, European Christians had become aware of a wider world beyond the

⁴¹ The Mamluk Sultan of Egypt.

⁴² (Jordanus 1863, 45–46).

⁴³ (Jordanus 1863, 44).

⁴⁴ (Jordanus 1863, 42).

⁴⁵ For a recent compilation and translation of sources on the myth, see (Brewer 2015).

⁴⁶ Compare for instance (Silverberg 1972; Knobler 2017). Writings on Prester John were not limited to Latin Europe or Byzantium, only – the priest-king also appears in Eastern and Oriental Christian sources such as the *Chronicon Syriacum* of Gregory Bar Hebraeus as well as in late medieval Jewish sources.

⁴⁷ See the compilation of respective sections in their writing in (Brewer 2015).

⁴⁸ See (Knefelkamp 1999).

Eastern Mediterranean. Over the course of the 12th and 13th centuries, they were also increasingly losing their foothold in the Levant – a process fuelling fanciful musings about a fellow Christian emperor, lord of a grand Christian realm, who could help Latin Christendom turn the tide, and even help reclaim the Holy Land from the Muslims once and for all. Numerous high-profile missions sent out by princely and ecclesiastical rulers from the late 12th century onwards had offered no satisfying answer to the question of the location of Prester John and his empire – and his willingness to ally himself with the West.⁴⁹ By the middle of the 14th century, and thus some two-hundred years after the inception of the myth, we witness a gradual shift in the Latin imagination: Prester John and his empire are imagined increasingly in Africa instead of Asia.

The above-quoted passage from the *Mirabilia descripta* by Jordanus is one of the earliest to ‘relocate’ Prester John in this way. The reasons for this are not fully clear, and it must be said that the conflation of a factual Christian realm south of Mamluk-ruled Egypt with the fanciful notions about Prester John’s fantastic empire was a gradual one in the mid-14th century. What we can observe is that Latin clerics-cum-authors, some of them well travelled like Jordanus, wrote with increasing interest about the lands south of Egypt. One good example is the work by the unknown Spanish author of the *Libro del Conoscimiento de todos los reinos*, the ‘Book of Knowledge of All Kingdoms’.⁵⁰ He offered his readers a combination of factual information on the realm of Solomonic Ethiopia alongside stories about Prester John. Writing in the second half of the 14th century,⁵¹ the author talks about the ‘empire of Abdeselib, which means “servant of the cross” [who] is the defender of the Church of Nubia and of Ethiopia’.⁵² Abdeselib might at first glance appear a fanciful name given by Europeans to an Ethiopian emperor; however, it is a corruption of the Arabic version of an actual Ethiopi-

⁴⁹ Among them William of Rubruck, John of Plano Carpini and John of Montecorvino in the 13th and early 14th century.

⁵⁰ Not much is known about the author of the work: the text itself states that he was a Christian born in Castile in 1305; whether he really travelled to some of the places described or just collected information from merchants and travellers remains unclear.

⁵¹ The dating ranges from 1350 to 1385, according to different evaluations by two groups of researchers who edited and extensively studied the text. The older editors Esplada and Markham in 1877 and 1912 respectively believe in a date of composition at the middle of the 14th century, as is already voiced in the respective full titles of the editions; the two simultaneous editions of 1999 both argue for a dating to the last quarter of the 14th century; see (Jiménez de la Espada 1877; Markham 1912; Lacarra and Lacarra Ducay 1999; Marino 1999).

⁵² “[...] ynperio de Abdeselib, que quiere dezir siervo de la cruz.” (Marino 1999, 60, 61).

an regal name: it is a largely correct transliteration of the Arabic *'abd as-ṣalīb*, which translates as 'Servant of the Cross'.⁵³ This thoroughly Christian identifier referred to none other than one of the most prominent and militarily, as well as politically, successful rulers of Solomonic Ethiopia in the 14th century: *aṣe* 'Amdä Ṣəyon, whose throne name Gābrä Mäsqäl indeed translates as 'Servant of the Cross'. The author of the *Libro del Conoscimiento* is not the first European to refer to the *nəguś* by this name. In the markings of a portolan chart⁵⁴ drawn by Angelino Dulcert⁵⁵ in 1339, the name 'Abdeselib' appear in the vicinity of Nubia and Ethiopia. A cartouche adds the rather mangled information that '[t]his Saracen king is at a continuous war with the Christians of Nubia and Ethiopia, who are under the rule of the Prester John, the black Christian'.⁵⁶ The 'Servant of the Cross', *aṣe* 'Amdä Ṣəyon, was of course no 'Saracen' king – a misconception possibly based on a misunderstanding of the Arabic form of the name. By the time Dulcert drew up his portolan, *aṣe* Amdä Ṣəyon was the incumbent *nəguś* of the Solomonic Empire.⁵⁷ Dulcert's portolan placed the de facto *nəguś* of Ethiopia and the 'black Christian' Prester John in close proximity. The *Libro del Conoscimiento*⁵⁸ stated that *aṣe* Amdä Ṣəyon defended 'Prester John, who is the patriarch of Nubia and Ethiopia and governs many great lands and many cities of Christians'.⁵⁹ Neither of them identified this Solomonic king with Prester John – yet. But within the steadily changing European discourse on Prester John in

⁵³ (Fiaccadori 2007, 564–65).

⁵⁴ A map mainly made for navigating at sea, showing compass directions and estimated distances. While other contemporary maps were not intended to depict geographic accuracy, portolans show a surprisingly accurate outline of harbours and ports from the 13th century onwards.

⁵⁵ Also called Angelino de Dalorto, probably a Genoese active in Mallorca by the early to mid-14th century. He is famous for two signed maps, one dated to 1330 (formerly dated to 1325) and one dated to 1339. Both show Europe and the Mediterranean, as well as parts of Northern Africa and the region of the Red Sea; see (Falchetta 1994).

⁵⁶ "Iste Rex saracenus habet continuo guerra cum christianos nubie et ethiopie qui sunt sub dominio prest Iane christianus niger." [sic!] Quoted in Marino's introduction to (Marino 1999, xxx).

⁵⁷ Until his death five years later in 1344.

⁵⁸ Should the Spanish 'Book of Knowledge' indeed have been compiled around the year 1350, as its first two editors suggested, the attribution would be both correct and near mention near simultaneous events.

⁵⁹ (Marino 1999, 60, 61).

The actual description of these Christians contained in the 'Book of Knowledge' is comparatively limited and familiar: "[...] they are as black as pitch and they burn themselves with fire on their foreheads with the sign of the cross in recognition of their baptism. And although these people are black, they are men of good understanding, and good mind, and they have knowledge and science [...]" (Marino 1999, 60, 61).

14th century Latin writing, militarily highly aggressive and successful Ethiopian *nägäšt* such as Amdä Šəyon and the mythical priest-king increasingly became powerful individuals connected through geographically adjoined or even allied Christian empires.⁶⁰

A piece of crusading propaganda addressed to the Bohemian king Charles IV gives further insight into this gradual equation. It dates roughly to the same timeframe as the *Libro del Conoscimiento* and purports to be well-informed about contemporary Ethiopian politics, as the letter claims to have been written by an Ethiopian *nəguś* himself, namely 'King Voddomaradeg, son of the most excellent King of Ethiopia, of Saionio, of Tobbia, of Nubia, the lands of Bettesi and Moritoro, and Prester John, King of India the Major and Minor.'⁶¹ The majority of these place names are fantasies: Tobbia seems to simply be a malapropism of 'It'yop'ya' or 'Itob'ya' and therefore of the name 'Ethiopia', Moritoro an evocative corruption of 'moro' for 'blacks' or 'Moors'. The name of the king – 'Voddomara-deg' – is, however, most certainly a corruption⁶² of Wədəm Ră'ad,⁶³ throne name of an Ethiopian *nəguś* regnant at the turn of the 14th century.⁶⁴ The purported authorship of the letter is slightly anachronistic: *aše* Wədəm Ră'ad died four years before Charles IV was even born. By the time the letter was written, this information was several decades out of date: even Wədəm Ră'ad's successor 'Amdä Šəyon had been succeeded by his son and heir, *aše* Säyfä Ar'ad.'⁶⁵

References to three actual Ethiopian *nägäšt* had found their way into Latin Christian writings of the early to mid-14th century – Yagba Šəyon in Marco Polo, Wədəm Ră'ad in the letter to Charles IV and 'Amdä Šəyon into the *Libro del Conoscimiento* and the portolan of Angelino Dulcert. The Latin Christian concepts of these rulers were in flux: the *nəguś* described as the 'Christian King, who is the Lord of the Province of Abasce' by Polo in 1299 had inched closer to

⁶⁰ In the 'Book of Knowledge', the 'Prester John' appears as a manifold personage, with a vast empire that stretches far beyond the confines of the realm protected by his apparent vassal, the 'Servant of the Cross'. Contemporary Ethiopian expansion was also recorded by Johannis Vitodurani (c.1348) who said that in 1341 there was *a atrocia bella* between the 'kings of Ethiopie and Egypt'. Compare 'Die Chronik Johannis von Winterthur' in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum III*, 194.

⁶¹ (Del Prete 1857, 9–10).

⁶² Although Gə'əz is one of the vocalized Semitic languages, the consonants still hold a pivotal importance. A look at the consonants in Voddomaradeg, V-D-M-R-D-G, and Wədəm Ră'ad, W-D-M-R-D, clearly demonstrates the obvious similarity between the two names, as also noted by (Charles Fraser Beckingham 1998).

⁶³ Wədəm Ră'ad, sometimes transcribed as Wedem Arad, *nəguś* of Ethiopia, 1299–1314.

⁶⁴ See (Derat 2010).

⁶⁵ *Aše* Säyfä Ar'ad, ruled 1344–1371.

becoming synonymous with the mythical 'Prester John' some fifty years later. In the last quarter of the 14th century, highly popular and just as fanciful texts like *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*⁶⁶ and the *Historia Trium Regum* of John of Hildesheim⁶⁷ began to fully equate the empire of Solomonic Ethiopia with the realm of Prester John.

Such embroidered tales arguably shaped the European perception of what the inhabitants of this realm were imagined to be in turn. In the last decade of the 14th century, Philippe de Mézières⁶⁸ presented Prester John as a truly awe-inspiring man in his *Songe du Vieil Pelerin* – 'Dream of an old Pilgrim': Prester John was the grandest lord of the world, with all of the three Indies under his command, the paradise was located just next to his realm, and the relics of St Thomas under his protection.⁶⁹

And yet, all these embellishments did not necessarily discount the possibility of reality for contemporaries, even those of the highest order: in the last decade of the 14th century, for instance, King John I of Aragon eagerly begged the Count of Foix in Southern France to send him a Minorite friar who claimed to have 'lived many years in the Realm of Prester John and told many marvellous tales of these parts of the world.'⁷⁰ Only when keeping in mind just who and what Prester John signified in the European perception at this point does the excitement of the ruler of Aragon – himself a king at the pinnacle of power in his part of the world – become understandable. Similarly, in 1400, the newly crowned Henry IV felt the need to introduce an English friar, John Greenlaw,⁷¹ the newly appointed archbishop of Sultania,⁷² to various 'Eastern' regents. The first of these oriental potentates Henry addressed was 'the magnificent and powerful princely ruler of Abassia, or Prester John, our beloved friend in Christ', to whom he sent greetings 'in the name of the almighty Saviour'.⁷³ In his letter to this 'Abassian' king, the English king did not just send benevolent wishes; he voiced his ardent

⁶⁶ First circulated between 1357–1371 in Anglo-Norman French. Chapters 30–32 deal with the realm of Prester John and Ethiopia, see (Mandeville 1900).

⁶⁷ Written ca. 1364, see (John of Hildesheim 1886).

⁶⁸ 1327–1405, French diplomat and author, chancellor of Cyprus in the 1360s; the text was written in 1389.

⁶⁹ *Songe du Vieil Pelerin*, the manuscript is in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal Paris, MS. 2682. Fol. 52 shows a date of 1389.

⁷⁰ Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Ms. 1958, fol. 186r; ed. in (Rubió y Lluch 1908, 365).

⁷¹ John Greenlaw was an English Minorite friar. Sultania had been erected into an archiepiscopal See by Pope John XXII in 1318; it is located in current north-western Iran near Tabriz and called Soltaniyeh or Sultaniyya (Ellis 1846, 55–56).

⁷² (Hingeston 1860, 419); Taddesse Tamrat goes so far as to suggest John was to be the actual bearer of the letter to Ethiopia; cf. (Taddesse Tamrat 1972, 257, note 2).

⁷³ British Library, Cotton MS Nero B XI, fol. 172r; ed. in (Hingeston 1860, 421–22).

desire to re-visit Jerusalem, and to hopefully encounter the 'magnificent prince' at the Holy Sepulchre – ideally, to once and forever rid the Holy Land of the Muslims in a joint, pan-Christian endeavour.⁷⁴ Just two years before the first official Solomonic delegation made landfall in Venice, Latin Christian diplomatic approaches towards Ethiopian rulers, such as that of Henry IV, had become deeply influenced by ideas originally ascribed onto the mythical Prester John.

The Man and the Myth: Latin Christian diplomatic correspondence of the 15th and early 16th century

The Venetian record on the 1402 embassy is a good example for how intimately the two had become tied up in the Latin mind: all Venetian documents relating to the embassy, from private letters to official accounts of the Republic of Venice, state that it had been *prete Jane*,⁷⁵ *Prestozane*,⁷⁶ *prete Janni*⁷⁷ and *domini Presti Zane domini Indie*⁷⁸ – and thus the Lord Prester John, Lord of the Indies – who had sent his delegates to Venice. Not a single document mentions the personal name of the Ethiopian *naguś*, *aṣe* Dawit II, the very much non-mythical sovereign who had actually despatched the embassy. The sources from Venice impress upon us how Prester John had become an established cognomen for the Ethiopian *naguś* in Europe. But the conflation seems to go beyond a simple substitution in name. When Francesco Novello da Carrara,⁷⁹ the lord of Padua, learned of the arrival of the Solomonic delegation, he immediately wrote to the *Signoria* in Venice: 'I have understood that an ambassador from Prester John brought many marvelous and strange things, and among them the hide of a wild man, and the hide of a donkey with many colours'. Francesco wishes to see 'these strange things', and therefore implored the Venetian government to send him some of the items

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Francesco Novello da Carrara to Francisco de Priulis and Paulo Mauroceno on the 26th of June 1402; Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Ms. lat. XIV, 93 = 4530, fol. 64r; ed. in (Pastorello 1915, 260).

⁷⁶ Records of the Great Council of Venice, 22nd of July 1402; Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Magg. Cons. Deliberazioni A, fol. 21r.

⁷⁷ Inventory list for the sanctuary of St. Mark in Venice, 1402; Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Ms. it. VII, nr. 374, coll. 7781, fol. 40; ed. in (Gallo 1967, 288).

⁷⁸ Records of the Venetian Senate, 10th of August 1402; Archivio di Stato Venezia, Senato Misti, reg. XLVI, fol. 36v and letter of Michele Steno to the Duke of Candia, 26th August 1402; Archivio di Stato Venezia, Duca di Candia, Ms. 1, fol. 1v; ed. in (Thieriet 1978, sec. 7).

⁷⁹ Francesco II da Carrara, Lord of Padua, 1359–1406.

for inspection – promising to send them back as soon as possible after he had viewed them.⁸⁰

If a grand lord like Francesco was mesmerized by the prospect of seeing live leopards, and the hide of a zebra and monkey, his excitement must at least partially have been derived from the presumption that these exotic things had originated from the realm of the long-elusive Prester John. Similarly, three Ethiopian delegates caused quite a stir at the court of the Cardinal of Aquileia in Rome in 1404.⁸¹ Our source on the encounter evocatively describes how this conflation of Prester John's empire with Solomonic Ethiopia appears to have been very real to Latin contemporaries: in one instance, the assembled Latin dignitaries questioned the Ethiopian delegates on their land of origin, ultimately having sections from 'the Book of the Three Kings' owned by Angelus de Perusio⁸² read out to them. The Ethiopians 'willingly listened' to the information on their home country purportedly contained therein, including 'the proper names of their leaders, princes and bishops'.⁸³ Subsequently, they agreed with their entranced Italian audience that, indeed, everything in their native country was just as it was described in this 'Book of the Three Kings'. They even lauded their audience for how well-informed they were about the names of their nobility. The delegates are subsequently described as being very amused, huddling together and laughing after making this statement.⁸⁴ The book from which the Roman contemporaries drew their knowledge about Ethiopia was most probably the above-mentioned *Historia Trium Regum* attributed to John of Hildesheim. Thus, the three Ethiopian emissaries had been confronted with a rather fanciful romance 'history' about the Three Magi – which includes lengthy passages on their descendant, the fabled Prester John. It must remain unclear why they concurred with this story. Had they deliberately accepted the story read out to them, realized that it was fanciful – but still decided that it was in their advantage to further such an advantageous-seeming belief about their sovereign as a powerful figure connected to Scripture? Our source on the encounter – the Ethiopian embassy and its

⁸⁰ "Item perch'io ho inteso che l'è venuto li ambasciatore del prete Jane, li quali ano portato de stranie cosse, et tra le altre vna pelle de vno homo saluego, e vna pelle de vno aseno de diuersi colore, et io sun desideroso de vedere de queste cosse stranie, pregoue che pregati la Segnoria, che ge piaqua mandarme de quelle cosse stranie, che li hano portade, azoche io le veda, in quanto el non ge sia griue, perche uedute quelle, ge le mandero subito indrio." Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Ms. lat. XIV, 93 = 4530, fol. 64r; ed. in (Pastorello 1915, 260).

⁸¹ Museo di Cividale di Friuli, Codice diplomatico Boiani 6, doc. 352.

⁸² Museo di Cividale di Friuli, Codice diplomatico Boiani 6, doc. 352; ed. in (Lazzarini 1924, 846).

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

activities in Rome in 1404 are described in the letter of an Italian nuncio⁸⁵ to a friend, and thus an outsider's perspective – is necessarily vague here. And yet, the description seems to indicate that the Ethiopian delegates were potentially deliberately fibbing their audience – why else would they both laugh and agree when confronted with such a tall tale? It is clear, however, that the actions of the Ethiopian envoys were inadvertently feeding into, and strengthening, a European fiction on both their homeland and their sovereign.

A more prosaic conflation of the Solomonic realm with that of Prester John is traceable in most sources attesting to Ethiopian-European encounters of the 15th century. A merchant's itinerary kept in the National Library in Florence meticulously maps the route from Venice to the Solomonic court of the *naguś* sometime prior to the year 1413. The author of the itinerary informs his reader that the directions provided would guide the traveller to 'Ethiopia',⁸⁶ where 'Prester John' ruled, whose 'proper name is David'⁸⁷ and that this Prester John was indeed king of kings over 12 other sovereigns.⁸⁸ In 1418, Ulrich Richental's chronicle states that 'three Ethiopians' who had come out of the 'realm of the Lord Prester John' had been present at the Council of Constance.⁸⁹ Richental himself gives a reason why the information on them, as well as on Prester John, remained vague: 'they knew no Latin or any other language that anybody could understand'.⁹⁰ Twenty years later, four Ethiopian delegates at the Council of Florence arrived in Italy in 1441. They were questioned by three cardinals in front of a number of church dignitaries. The Italian humanist Flavio Biondo was among the audience; he left us an extensive description of the Ethiopian delegation as well as the information gleaned from them in one of his contemporary historical works.⁹¹ Before the assembled ecclesiastics raised any questions about actual religious practices

⁸⁵ The source is the letter of Candido de Bona, Roman nuncio of the Collegiate of S. Maria in Cividale in Friuli; the letter is addressed to his friend, the knight Corrado Boiani.

⁸⁶ It states: "te ad Ethiopiam pervenisse"; Biblioteca Nazionale Firenze, Ms. Misc. II, IV, 109, fol. 87r; ed. in (Iorga 1910, 147).

⁸⁷ "Presto Johannes [...] cui principi nomen proprium est David"; see Biblioteca Nazionale Firenze, Ms. Misc. II, IV, 109, fol. 88v; ed. in (Iorga 1910, 147).

⁸⁸ Biblioteca Nazionale Firenze, Ms. Misc. II, IV, 109, fol. 88v; ed. in (Iorga 1910, 147).

⁸⁹ (Richental 2010, 193). The individual safe conducts and papal letters issued for the delegates in 1418 only described them as 'Ethiopians' or 'of the parts of India Maior' (Lefèvre 1946, 21).

⁹⁰ (Richental 2010, 193).

⁹¹ The 'Decades of History from the deterioration of the Roman Empire' - *Historiarum ab inclinatione Romanorum imperii* decades, written from 1439 to 1453 and published in 1483; the description of the Ethiopian delegates and their interrogation is included in the Second Book of the Fourth Decade, Chapters 32–47; ed. in (Nogara and Biondo 1927, 19–27).

in Ethiopia,⁹² they enquired about the person of 'Prester John': the Ethiopians were asked about their ruler, 'who is called Prester John in Syria and Egypt and among us'. According to Biondo, they responded that the *nəguś* was unworthily called by 'this absurd appellation' with displeasure. They insisted that 'his proper own name is Zareiacob', which meant 'scion of the prophet Jacob' – but that he was also called 'Constantinus for dignity, as he has similar virtue and power as Flavius Constantinus, who first transferred the seat of the Roman empire to Constantinople.'⁹³

By 1441, a hundred years after a European planisphere had first geographically placed Prester John in Eastern Africa, some part of the legend of Prester John and Europe's inclination to identify this particular mythical ruler with the *nəguś* had become known in Ethiopia. And although Ethiopian contemporaries thought this appellation 'absurd', *aše Zär'a Ya'əqob* was not to be divested of the omnipresent sobriquet: on 4th October 1441, Eugene IV addressed 'the great Lord Constantine, emperor of Ethiopia and the so-called Prester John' in one of his letters again. In January 1444, the Franciscan Gandulph of Sicily wrote to Pope Eugene IV about an encounter he had had with Ethiopian delegates in the Holy Land that year. Gandulph refrained from using the title Prester John when describing the Ethiopian ambassadors – he even went so far as to initially refer to the Ethiopian *nəguś* as Constantinus, using *aše Zär'a Ya'əqob*'s chosen throne name.⁹⁴ And yet, the association of Ethiopian *nägäšt* with Prester John persists somewhat more implicitly: in the same letter, Gandulph refers to the fanciful European romantic fiction that Prester John was a descendant of the Three Magi and states that the Ethiopian ambassadors had come to 'Bethlehem on the feast of the Epiphany of the Lord' to worship the Lord there 'as once the Three Magi once had done'.⁹⁵

The princely rulers of Europe were hardly deterred by the fact that the Ethiopian emperors time and again identified themselves by their personal names – all entirely dissimilar to that of 'John'. Most of the direct correspondence that has come down to us by European sovereigns addressing the Ethiopian *nəguś*, first state his personal name; nevertheless, the sobriquet 'Prester John' is also present – it is turned into a regal title with consistency. In 1428, Alfonso V of Aragon addressed *aše Yəshaq* as

⁹² Chapters 42–46; see (Nogara and Biondo 1927, 24–26).

⁹³ (Nogara and Biondo 1927, 23).

⁹⁴ (Wadding 1734, 221); *aše Zär'a Ya'əqob*'s throne name, Constantine, is most commonly transliterated as Q^wäştāntinos from Ethiopian texts.

⁹⁵ (Wadding 1734, 220); transl. in (Plante 1975, 137).

the most eminent and invincible monarch lord Ysach, son of David, by the grace of God Prester John of the Indians, lord of the Tablets of Mt. Sinai and the Throne of David, king of Ethiopian kings, as ift to a brother modt special to us.⁹⁶

In an internal memorandum issued to Aragonese ambassadors a few months later, however, Yəṣḥaq is referred to once again without a personal name, becoming simply 'Prester John, located in India and other parts'.⁹⁷ In another official Aragonese letter to *aṣe* Yəṣḥaq dating to 1430, the *nəguś* once more becomes

the most eminent and invincible monarch lord Ysaac, by the grace of God Prester John of the Indians, son of David, and lord of the Tablets of Mt. Sinai, our dearest brother.⁹⁸

Thus, the title of Prester John is only one fragment of a whole string of honorary appellations by which Alfonso chose to address the Ethiopian ruler. To a certain degree this concurs with norms of diplomatic correspondence of the 15th century: while European kings might possibly not have been addressed with a byname evoking such truly mythical connotations, a certain set of honorific titles was a staple of diplomatic correspondence between European rulers as well. It stands to reason that in the first half of the 15th century, the byname Prester John appeared to be the fitting, honorific title to be used by a European sender when writing to the *nəguś*.

A close look at official sources directed towards the Solomonic empire after the Council of Florence – when contemporary Ethiopian displeasure for the mythical title was made known – shows a remarkable shift in diplomatic address to accommodate for this news: direct correspondence towards the *nəguś* as well as official documents involving Solomonic delegates now invoke Zär'a Ya'əqob by name. A safe conduct for the 1450 embassy to Rome issued by Pope Nicholas V refers to the Ethiopian ambassadors solely as

our beloved sons Pietro Romulus of Messina and Michael, prior of the church of St. Mary of Gudaber, and Abumar Elzend [...] spokesmen of our dearest son in Christ Constantine, the illustrious emperor of Ethiopia.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Ms. Reg. 2680, fol. 165r.

⁹⁷ Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Ms. Reg. 2677, fol. 54r.

⁹⁸ Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Ms. Reg. 2684, fol. 145r.

⁹⁹ (de Witte 1956, 295).

And yet, an internal memorandum discussing the expenses of the Sergeant of Arms Domenico di Carmignola for accompanying the Ethiopian party on their journey to Naples, however, again reverts to the old notion that Domenico was to be reimbursed for his 'expenses incurred [...] on behalf of the ambassadors of Prester John of India'¹⁰⁰ while conducting them from Rome to the Aragonese court in 1450. The above – official documents naming to the *nəguś* and excising all mentions of Prester John while internal sources remain unchanged – reveals itself as a pattern: that same summer of 1450, the Aragonese king Alfonso V addressed Zär'a Ya'əqob as 'most illustrious and majestic prince, lord Zere Iacobo, son of David, of the House of Solomon, emperor of Ethiopia, our brother and dearest friend'.¹⁰¹ And yet: in an internal Aragonese treasury list, dated only eight days later, the leaders of the Ethiopian delegation, Pietro Rombulo and brother Michael, are again referred to only as the ambassadors of 'Prester John of the Indies'.¹⁰²

Similar patterns can be observed for the early 16th century: the 1514 arrival of Queen Regent Eleni's ambassador Mateus in Portugal generated a fair bit of correspondence, and in their official letters to the *nəguś*, both Manuel I of Portugal and Pope Leon X addressed Ləbnä Dəngəl by one of his throne names, Dawit, throughout.¹⁰³ Leon X even takes care to refer to his 'his mother, our dearest daughter in Christ Helena, a woman (as we have learned) most prudent and famous for her piety towards God and for her religious devotion'. He also excised all references to Prester John from this and all his subsequent letters.¹⁰⁴ In the semi-private correspondence between Manuel I and the pope,¹⁰⁵ however, Manuel boasted that the Portuguese in Goa had received '[...] an ambassador [...] from Prester John, most powerful lord of Christians'.¹⁰⁶ Manuel's remark

¹⁰⁰ (de Witte 1956, 296).

¹⁰¹ Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Ms. 2658, fol. 57r.

In his subsequent attempts to contact the Ethiopian *nəguś*, Alfonso was to change the salutatory address of his fellow ruler to the 'most serene prince Zara Jacobo, son of David of the house of the Solomonians, Emperor of Ethiopia and our dearest friend' in 1452 and as the 'most serene prince Zara Jacobo, son of David of the house of the Salomonians in India Major and the Emperor of Ethiopia with fraternal affection' in 1453. See Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Ms. 2658, fol. 178r. and Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Ms. 2661, fol. 20v.

¹⁰² (Cerone 1902, 71).

¹⁰³ (Raineri 2005, sec. 10).

¹⁰⁴ (Raineri 2005, secs. 9, 10, 10a).

¹⁰⁵ It was subsequently printed as *Epistola de Victoriis Habitis in India & Malacha*, Rome, August 9, 1513; Manuel I, King of Portugal: Letter to Pope Leo X dated June 6, 1513; again published in *Novus Orbis Regnorum ac Insularum Veteribus Incognitarum*, in Basel in March 1532; transl. in (Rogers 1962, 127–28).

¹⁰⁶ As quoted and transl. in (Rogers 1962, 127).

that the ambassador had 'offer[ed] the name of his monarch, as one Christian to another'¹⁰⁷ makes it clear that by the early 16th century, the appellation 'Prester John' was at best a hereditary identifier for a successive group of descendants originating in the same, distinct realm. Even for Manuel, however, this differentiation appeared entirely facultative. In 1521, a summary of letters describing the first contact of the Portuguese with the Ethiopians on Ethiopian soil was published on behalf of the Portuguese king. It praised the Portuguese achievement of reaching '[...] the land of the Prester John, a Christian king and of very great power [...]' to the wider public.¹⁰⁸ A contemporary French account about the new developments of the Portuguese stated that they 'at last found that most powerful bishop of the Indian and Ethiopian Christians, Prester John, Lord of the Province of Abyssinia.'¹⁰⁹

While Ethiopian kings were thus addressed with personal names from the second half of the 15th century onwards in direct correspondence with the Solomonic empire, internal Latin sources consistently show how the *naguś* was perceived as Prester John. Mixed forms, where priest-king and Solomonic regnal names are stated together – i.e. the Armenian Mateus being described as 'ambassador of the great Indian Emperor Presbyter Ioan and his mother, Queen Helena'¹¹⁰ – only emphasize this conjunction. When introducing Johanne Baptista Brochus of Imola, who had acted as companion to an Ethiopian delegation to Rome in 1481, Paris de Grassis mentions that when he was a boy, he had witnessed the arrival of 'the Indian and Chaldean spokesmen sent by their emperor, whom we commonly call Prester John'.¹¹¹ It must be stressed that de Grassis was still thusly referring to the Solomonic ambassadors when he approached Brochus in the 1508–1509, many decades after the embassy. Brochus himself took then care to state that the Ethiopian emperor was commonly referred to in his own country as 'nagus' – the ruling title of *naguś*. However, somewhat later in his testimony, Brochus clarified this foreign term for his audience: he stated that the Ethiopian emperor should be understood as 'this nagus or Prester John',¹¹² highlighting how both were synonymous in his belief.

Regrettably, only very few copies of letters written by Solomonic sovereigns to Western rulers have come down to us to show the Ethiopian side of this

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ (Thomas and Cortesao 1938, fol. A1v), transl. in (Thomas and Cortesao 1938, 63).

¹⁰⁹ *La rescription du treshumain vertueulx & inuictissime roy de Portugal. Enuoye a nostre saint pere le pape. des gestes faictz en la mer rouge. Et de la paix / paction / conuenance et alliance: commencee par luy avec Prebstre iehan Roy de Ethiopie*, Paris, after May 8 1521; as quoted and translated in (Rogers 1962, 139).

¹¹⁰ (Gois 1532, fol. A2v).

¹¹¹ See (Lefèvre 1958, 107).

¹¹² (Lefèvre 1958, 107).

long-distance correspondence between Ethiopian and Latin Christians. All date from the beginning of the 16th century. In these, the Ethiopian senders unanimously refer to themselves with their proper names and location: Queen Regent Eleni calls herself 'Eleni, Queen of Ethiopia'.¹¹³ *Aṣe Ləbnä Dəngəl* takes great care to provide a whole list of ancestors with their baptismal names in his identification:

This letter and ambassador are being sent by our king Ləbnä Dəngəl, the king of kings of Ethiopia, the son of Na'od, son of the king Bā'ədä Maryam, son of king Zār'a Ya'əqob and from the seed of Dawit [David] and Sälomon [Solomon] who reigned in IYärusalem [Jerusalem].¹¹⁴

In other missives, among them one to Pope Clement VII in 1524, *aṣe Ləbnä Dəngəl* refers to himself as 'the most serene Dawit, ruler of Ethiopia'. In a letter concerning the Bull of the Union that had reached Ethiopia during the reign of *aṣe Zār'a Ya'əqob*, Ləbnä Dəngəl furthermore stressed firmly that the Latin document had been brought to Ethiopia 'while the Seed of Jacob was ruling as King of Kings, King to Be Feared, over all of Ethiopia'¹¹⁵ – giving a literal translation of the baptismal name of *aṣe Zār'a Ya'əqob*. Thus, if there was a mythical ancestry that the Ethiopians themselves referred to, it was their supposed descent from the dynasty of the Biblical king Solomon, and, occasionally, also the House of David.

¹¹³ "[...] አሌኒ፡ ንግሥተ፡ ኢትዮጵያ [...]" Qese Gabaz Tekle Haimanot, *Chronicle of Ethiopia* Ms, 85; ed. and transl. in (Sergew Hable Selassie 1974, 554, 556).

¹¹⁴ "[...] ዘንተ፡ መልአከተ፡ ወሐዋርያ፡ ደፊኑ፡ ንግሥነ፡ ልብነ፡ ጅንግል፡ ንግሥ፡ ነግሥት፡ ዘኢትዮጵያ፡ ወልዱ፡ ለናቦጅ፡ ወልደ፡ ነግሥ፡ በአደ፡ ማርያም፡ ወልደ፡ ንግሥ፡ ዘርክ፡ ያዕቆብ፡ ወእምዘርክ፡ ዳዊት፡ ወሰሎሞን፡ አለ፡ ነግሡ፡ በኢየሩሳሌም፡፡" Qese Gabaz Tekle Haimanot, *Chronicle of Ethiopia* Ms, 85; ed. and transl. in (Sergew Hable Selassie 1974, 558, 562). Alvares Portuguese transcription of the letter as given in his travelogue presents all Ethiopian names in their literal meaning and makes the reference to a 'Dawit', either a reference to the biblical ancestor or his great-grandfather *nəguś Dawit II*, less ambiguous: "I, Incense of the Virgin, King of Ethiopia, send you this letter and embassy, the son of Nahu, son of the King of the Hand of Mary, son of the King of the Seed of Jacob, these are those who were born of the house of David and Salomon, who were Kings in Jerusalem." (Alvares 1961, 503).

¹¹⁵ (Raineri 2005, 65).

The accounts of Ethiopian ambassadors in Europe

It is remarkable that some Ethiopian envoys to Europe appear to have actively encouraged conflating the person of the Ethiopian *nəguś* with that of Prester John. As we have seen above, the three Ethiopian delegates in Rome in 1404 seemingly encouraged the belief that everything in their native country was just as described 'in the Book of the Three Kings'.¹¹⁶ While the Ethiopian delegation present at the Ecumenical Council of Florence in 1441 stated that their ruler suffered this absurd appellation that has been given to him with displeasure,¹¹⁷ they also appeared all too aware of the advantages of endorsing some of the attributes of this legendary figure for Zār'a Ya'eqob: it seems they did little to fully deny the title 'Prester John'. Moreover, they must have also grossly oversold the power and might of their sovereign,¹¹⁸ telling their captive audience that the *nəguś* had one-hundred kings under him, and that the kingdoms of each of these kings were as big as kingdoms found in Europe.¹¹⁹

An account of the questions the Portuguese court put to the Ethiopian ambassador Mateus in 1514¹²⁰ demonstrates that more than half a century later, Mateus also did little to dispel the preconceived notions about his lord upon encountering them in Portugal. If anything, he did – or was understood as doing, as our main source on his examination before the Portuguese nobles was brought to paper by a Portuguese author, Damião de Góis – his very best to combine information on the *nəguś* with Portuguese notions of Prester John. According to the source, Mateus introduced his sovereign as follows:¹²¹

The proper name of the Emperor is David,¹²² his common name Presbyter Ioannes, king of the Abyssinians. His titles are as follows: king of

¹¹⁶ Museo di Cividale di Friuli, Codice diplomatico Boiani 6, doc. 352; ed. in (Lazzarini 1924, 846).

¹¹⁷ (Nogara and Biondo 1927, 23).

¹¹⁸ At least some appear gross overstatements given in certainly rounded numbers. It remains difficult to compare the actual extent and military manpower under the command of the *nəguś*, as territories controlled and troops commanded shifted considerably during the reigns of several rulers in the 15th century. For an in-depth study of Solomonic power, territory and influence during this period, see (Derat 2003).

¹¹⁹ (Nogara and Biondo 1927, 23).

¹²⁰ (Gois 1532, A3v, A6r).

¹²¹ Also noted by (Lawrance 1992), who, however, understands it mainly as a 'superimposition' of the Ethiopian *nəguś* with Prester John originating firmly in Portugal, and does not consider the role Mateus' statements themselves might have played in this conflation.

¹²² Indeed, one of the throne-names of *nəguś* Ləbnä Dəngəl was Dawit.

kings David, king of the Abyssinians, Presbyter Ioannes, king of kings of these Abyssinians and of all his provinces, and from thence to the end of the seas, King of the Nile, and judge of the great Sultan, and of the realms of Cairo, the See of Alexandria by power of God and our redeemer Jesus Christ and by the power of the Blessed Virgin Mary.¹²³

Moreover, Mateus' statements on the 'realm and estate of the emperor Prester Ioannes' reads like a carefully constructed mix of contemporary Ethiopian reality and an account intended to play into European ideas: here, Solomonic Ethiopia positively abounds in rich cities and towns, exotic trade, a court resplendent in silks, velvet, satin, damask and other precious things, an abundance of gold, silver and other metal – so much gold, in fact, that trade was exclusively conducted with it by weight.¹²⁴ This is not necessarily untrue: though in-depth research on pre-modern Ethiopian trade networks remains a desideratum, we know that Ethiopia harboured a fair share of gold producing provinces and tributaries; pre-*ḡihādic* churches and palaces are described as harbouring great quantities of fine, imported cloths and objects in the *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*.¹²⁵ Mateus also refers to a richness in food, an abundance of animals and a wealthy, shining, sophisticated court comprised of many noble princes, dukes, marquises, earls, barons, lords of great lands and revenues.¹²⁶ Most tellingly, however, is this statement:

The emperor's estate and power is in all things very great, as he has under his dominion sixty Christian kings to mighty kingdoms [...] Apart from these sixty kings, he has also five kings of the Muslim tribe under him.¹²⁷

According to Mateus, the *nəguś* – *aṣe Ləbnä Dəngəl*, who had still been a child at the time the Armenian left the Solomonic Empire for his mission – was therefore a true king of kings: he had exactly sixty-five kings under him – sixty of them Christian, and five Muslim. Coincidentally, this particular number – sixty-five – is the number featured most often besides the number seventy-two in the 'Letters of Prester John' in circulation in Europe in the high and late Middle Ages.¹²⁸ If Mateus was just picking numbers out of thin air to emphasise the strength of the Solomonic Empire, then he had happened to pick a particularly significant number. Furthermore, Mateus' account puts great emphasis on the cultured and Christian ways of the Ethiopian empire, with ample allusions to

¹²³ (Gois 1532, fol. B5r).

¹²⁴ (Gois 1532, fol. B3v).

¹²⁵ See (Stenhouse and Pankhurst 2005).

¹²⁶ (Gois 1532, fol. B4r).

¹²⁷ (Gois 1532, fol. B4r).

¹²⁸ First noted by (Lawrance 1992, 321).

age-old traditions, the importance of Scripture, fair judgement, good governance and the written word.¹²⁹ The Ethiopia evoked by Mateus is a nexus of Christian culture, featuring an abundance of monastic orders with monks in the ten thousands,¹³⁰ as well as Crusader-style religious military orders dressed similarly to specific European military orders – Ethiopian crusading knights always ready to fight for their faith.¹³¹ Of course our main caveat with the testimony of Mateus must be that it has come down to us through a Portuguese lens – that of Damião de Góis. Góis himself states that he copied the official Portuguese court records, and emphasises that he presented all the Portuguese questions and Mateus' answers as they were put into writing by Manuel I's court secretary Antonio Carneiro in 1514.¹³² Did Carneiro adapt Mateus' testimony? Did the Portuguese willfully hear what they expected from Mateus – that Solomonic Ethiopia all but epitomized the empire of Prester John? Or did Mateus himself adjust his statements to his audience? Did Góis embroider the court documents? The only thing we can say with clarity is that the testament of Mateus must have perpetuated the stereotyping of the *nəguś* as Prester John for Latin contemporaries, once more.

In 1540, Damião de Góis was involved in compiling yet another testimony of an Ethiopian delegate to the Latin West. Written together with the Ethiopian envoy Ṣägga Zä'ab, an ecclesiastic despatched by *aṣe* Ləbnä Dəngəl to Portugal and the Papacy, Góis' book on the 'Belief, religion and customs of the Ethiopians'¹³³ offered up a rather ingenious interpretation that combined both Solomonic prestige with the figure of Prester John: the proper title of the *nəguś* – according to the Ethiopian ambassador – was not 'Prester John' but, instead, 'Precious John'.¹³⁴ Ṣägga Zä'ab insisted that it had been a mistranslation all along – inadvertently upholding the myth of the priest-king for the *nəgäšt* once more.

¹²⁹ See (Gois 1532, fols. 4r–4v).

¹³⁰ See (Gois 1532, fol. A8v).

¹³¹ (Gois 1532, fol. B4v); a marginal text to this point unsurprisingly equates them with the orders of crusaders of "Lusitania, Hispania, Germania, Prussia, Rhodos".

¹³² Compare Góis' statement on the matter in (Gois 1532, A3v, A6r).

¹³³ Published as *Fides, religio, moresque Aethiopiae* in Louvain in 1540 and in Paris just a year later. Gois mostly translated Ṣägga Zä'ab's account from Portuguese to Latin for this publication.

¹³⁴ Etymologically connected to an existing, older Ethiopian terminology, such as *jan hoy!*, an invocation denoting 'oh Majesty' or 'oh Precious', as a term of appreciation. Furthermore, the book states that this 'Precious John' would prefer to be called 'emperor of Ethiopia' instead of 'emperor of the Abyssinians' (Gois 1541, 89); it is impossible for me to infer what this difference would have connoted from a contemporary Ethiopian perception. Was the meaning of these terms for Ṣägga Zä'ab connected to 'Ethiopia' as denoting the whole country, including claimed historical territories and (former) tributaries, while 'Abyssinia' only referred to the highlands? Ṣägga Zä'ab's

The testimony of another Ethiopian delegate to Portugal is much more clear-cut. In 1565, the Portuguese João Bermudes published a book whose title translates to 'A short account of the [Ethiopian] Embassy';¹³⁵ it was published under the direct patronage of the Portuguese royal family. Bermudes had been part of the Portuguese mission to Ethiopia in 1520 and subsequently remained at the court of the *nəguś* for 15 years. Overall, Bermudes spent close to 30 years in Ethiopia, most of it in close connection to the Ethiopian court. In 1535, he had been despatched as the Ethiopian envoy to Latin Europe by Ləbnä Dəngəl. He was to call for military aid against the onslaught of Iman Ahmed's troops. Solomonic Ethiopia had been all but overrun by this point; to his death, *aṣe* Ləbnä Dəngəl became a ruler in want of a kingdom. And yet, none of this features in Bermudes' account. Instead, this Portuguese envoy of the *nəguś* presented the Ethiopia of the Prester John legend to his audience back home: according to Bermudes, 16th century Ethiopia was teeming with unicorns, it was home to one-breasted amazons who were 'suffered and preserved'¹³⁶ by the Ethiopian kings because they were 'founded' by the Queen of Saba. Fighting griffons, phoenixes, and snakes adorned with priceless stones¹³⁷ were to be found there; it was a land where the simple soil contained 'two parts of gold to one of earth'.¹³⁸ Bermudes thus actively played into every trope and fiction projected onto Solomonic Ethiopia imaginable – a testament that could not be further from the truth, particularly for late 16th century Solomonic Ethiopia, a realm that had only recently seen more than a decade of devastating military conflict.¹³⁹

The fact that testimony about Ethiopia from seemingly promising, supposedly knowledgeable sources could be misconstrued beyond all recognition shows how pervasive and long-lasting the stereotyping of the *nəguś* as Prester John re-

insistence suggest there must have been a considerable distinction in the local Ethiopian perception of the terms that did not translate.

¹³⁵ *Breve relação da embaixada que o Patriarcha D. João Bermudes trouxe do Imperador de Ethyopia chamado vulgarmente Preste João*, published in Lisbon in 1565 by Francisco Correa, 'Printer of the Cardinal Infante'; the Cardinal Infante of Portugal was to become Henry, King of Portugal from 1578–80.

¹³⁶ "São cōsentidas & cōseruadas por dizerem q forã instituidas pola rainha Saba [...]" ed. in (Bermudes 1875, 106), transl. in (Whiteway 1967, 237); Merid Wolde Aregay was first to point out the blatant exaggerations in Bermudes account (Merid Wolde Aregay 1974, 613).

¹³⁷ (Whiteway 1967, 236–39; Bermudes 1875, 108–10).

¹³⁸ Ed. in (Bermudes 1875, 108), transl. in (Whiteway 1967, 239).

¹³⁹ It must be stated that Bermudes' general attitude towards the truth was a loose one; in a similar vein, he was also to style himself the ordained Patriarch of Ethiopia to his contemporaries in Europe, wined and dined by not only the pope in Rome. His claims were only debunked in the 20th century. For a bibliography see (Martinez d'Alos-Moner 2003).

mained in the 16th century. Indeed, one of the reasons for the longevity of the myth of the Empire of Prester John and its application onto Ethiopia appears to be that, even before Bermudes' report, factually well-informed accounts about Solomonic Christian Ethiopia were hard to come by: the very sober mercantile itinerary and language list written by an unknown author prior to 1413, which provided concise directions on how to get from Venice to the Ethiopian highlands, as well as useful transliterated phrases for engaging in trade with Amharic-speakers, never seems to have enjoyed any wide reception.¹⁴⁰ Factual descriptions purely interested in the geography, flora and fauna of Ethiopia, such as Niccolò Conti's¹⁴¹ late 15th-century relation based on Ethiopian informants, are extremely rare.¹⁴² And even then, much of what Conti presented in his description of the Ethiopian fauna must still have appeared fictitious to his contemporaries: Conti's halting, awkward words on a giraffe and an ostrich appear to have been just as incredible to him as the fabricated description of a snake of monstrous, dragon-like proportions.¹⁴³ Indeed, how was a contemporary European author with limited first-hand knowledge – or his readership for that matter – supposed to be able to distinguish fact from fiction or confidently assess and differentiate between fictitious griffon or unicorn, and factual ostrich and rhinoceros? While Pietro Ranzano¹⁴⁴ had interrogated the Ethiopian ambassador Pietro Rombulo about Ethiopia in 1450 and included much factual information on Ethiopia in his *Annales omnium temporum*, he also could not resist the urge to embellish the account with descriptions of immense wealth, precious stones, gold, many tributary kings, exotic, partially fictitious animals, and an all-powerful Christian army of a massive size, clearly drawing on contemporary views of Prester John.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Biblioteca Nazionale Firenze, MSS Misc. II, IV, 109, fols. 87r–88v, edited in (Iorga 1910) and reprinted in part by Osbert Crawford as *Iter F* (Crawford 1958, 28–29). Wolbert Smidt and I are working on a detailed analysis of this most interesting source.

¹⁴¹ 1395–1469, Venetian merchant and long-distance traveller to Southeast Asia prior to 1439; he mostly dictated an account of his travels to the papal secretary Poggio Bracciolini in 1444, who included them in his book *De varietate fortunae*. In this source, the voice of the narrator often shifts from Poggio to Nicolò, making it hard to differentiate between the two authors (Conti 1857).

¹⁴² On the circumstances of Conti's writings and their transmission history also see (Tedeschi 1994).

¹⁴³ (Conti 1857, 38–39).

¹⁴⁴ 1428–1492, Italian Dominican friar, historian and humanist mainly focussing on Sicily. His *Annals of All Times* – the *Annales omnium temporum* – were written between 1450 and 1480 (Trasselli 1941).

¹⁴⁵ Compare the appendix II in (Trasselli 1941, 197–202).

The travelogue of Father Francisco Alvares provides a good example of how persistently blurred the lines between factual *nägäšt* and fictitious priest-king could be in Latin Christian writing. Between 1520 and 1526, Alvares was part of the Portuguese mission to the Solomonic court, acting as chaplain to the ambassador. Thus, Alvares had not only good first-hand knowledge of Ethiopia itself – he'd also spent extensive amounts of time at the Solomonic court and in the company of *naguś* Ləbnä Dəngəl himself. In 1540, Luís Rodrigues printed the first edition of Alvares' lengthy account of his time in Ethiopia in Lisbon; over the following decades, it was to be reprinted in numerous editions and languages. Alvares would arguably have contested the title his printer chose for the publication – but he had no say in the matter, as he appears to have passed away shortly before its publication. It is then one of the big ironies of fate that Alvares' report on Ethiopia and life at the court of the Ethiopian *naguś* was released bearing a very particular, and popular, title: *Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Indias* – 'A True Relation of the Lands of Prester John of the Indies'.¹⁴⁶ Even an account as detailed and insightful as that of Alvares, which had steered clear of wild flights of fancy, could – and would – eventually be subverted by the fiction of the priest-king.

The long shadow of Prester John in Latin Christian diplomacy

It would be presumptuous to assume that European contemporaries were incapable of differentiating between romantic tales, travelogues, treatises and official court examination records on Ethiopia. The problem remained that even supposedly well-informed European sources, including works by authors who should have known better, such as Bermudes, or the Portuguese court records of the examination of the Ethiopian envoy Mateus, still included fictional elements until the last years of the 16th century.¹⁴⁷ Doubts – or hopes – were difficult to support or disprove. Perpetuating fanciful notions about a distant country such as Ethiopia was far from difficult in late medieval Western Europe. There is an Amharic proverb in Ethiopia that translates to 'lying about a distant country is easy'. If the emphasis is stressed just a little bit differently, the words also imply that 'a distant country is a convenient place to be in when telling a lie'.¹⁴⁸ If huge geographical distances, different and entirely dissimilar languages, and the varied religious traditions are all factors that might expedite the dissemination of

¹⁴⁶ First published in Lisbon in 1540.

¹⁴⁷ For an in-depth account of 16th century printed monographs on Ethiopia and Ethiopia-related documents, see (Rogers 1962, 140–59).

¹⁴⁸ ሩቅ ሃገር ለውሽት ደመቻል – *ruq haḡär läwəšät yəmmäččall*.

untruths, Solomonic Ethiopia and the Latin Christian kingdoms and realms of Western Europe had sufficient of all of the above between them. There was also plenty of room for imagining, and misunderstanding, the other. Particularly in Christian Europe, preconceived notions about Ethiopia based on misunderstandings preceded the onset of actual diplomatic encounters between the two realms. As the above has shown, Ethiopian delegations were met with a distinctive home-grown image of what they and their sovereign, the *näguś*, supposedly represented by the early 15th century: an undefeated Christian champion of countless riches, and sworn adversary of Islam. Whether in 1402 or 1481, Ethiopian delegations coming to the Latin world were thus met by their coreligionists with a certain set of expectations forged by references to Ethiopians in the Bible and observations and flights of fancy in travelogues and romances. Indeed, in late medieval Europe, 'lying about a distant country' remained all too easy – even when ambassadors from that distant country came knocking at the door. Similarly, the complementary translation of the saying – that 'in a distant country it is easier to be lying' – was something Ethiopian ambassadors in Europe occasionally appear to have taken advantage of to suit their intentions. After all, it was not a bad strategy to be received under the illusion of being the ambassador of the potentially most powerful Christian ally Latin Europe could yearn for. And yet, all of the above must have necessarily influenced how Latin powers received Solomonic ambassadors – and with what intentions and demands princely and ecclesiastical rulers in Europe approached the *nägäšt*. As stated in the introduction to this article, the myth of Prester John not just conjured up a priest-king ruling justly over an awe-inspiring and paradisiac realm of seemingly boundless riches somewhere beyond the Muslim world. It primarily evoked a Christian ruler of extraordinary military power – and, as I would argue, shaped a very particular image of Ethiopia in Latin Christian perception: that of a most desirable militaristic ally. This reception and perception influenced the course of diplomatic contacts. It determined to what degree Western European potentates were eager to fulfil the requests posed by the Ethiopian diplomatic missions – which were entirely unrelated to military ventures before the 1520s¹⁴⁹ – and what they expected from the Ethiopians in return.

An in-depth study of the diplomatic sources on this encounter between African and European Christians reveals that Latin Christian interests were, indeed, first and foremost martial in nature: Most of the available sources reveal an undiminished Latin interest to enter into a military alliance with Ethiopia or

¹⁴⁹ As stated above, my research has shown that prior to the 1520s and the onset of the jihad, Solomonic rulers indeed did not show any particular interest in joint military ventures against the Muslim powers of the eastern Mediterranean; compare (Krebs 2014, Krebs 2019a, Krebs 2019b).

to obtain military assistance from the Solomonic Empire. The very first known European princely attempt to contact a *nəguś* – a letter by the English king Henry IV to Dawit II in 1400 – had included the expression of hope for assistance by the Ethiopian sovereign to ‘rescue the Holy Sepulchre from the hands of the Infidels’,¹⁵⁰ and a wish to meet the King of Ethiopia in a Jerusalem freed from ‘Saracens’.¹⁵¹ A memorandum relating to the Ethiopian embassy to Aragon in 1427 contains an Aragonese request for military assistance through ‘aid in money’ from the *nəguś*.¹⁵² In 1441, the Ethiopian delegates in Florence were questioned by Latin clerics and Pope Eugene IV himself on whether the Solomonic sovereign would ‘despatch the armies which he had in great numbers against the Muslims to expel them from Jerusalem and the cities and places of the Holy Land’.¹⁵³ The papacy was thus trying, directly, to make good on the promises first issued in Prester John’s letter to his predecessors some near three-hundred years earlier. Alfonso V of Aragon wrote to *aṣe Zär’a Ya’əqob* in 1450, 1452 and 1453, Pope Callisto III in 1456 – both were repeatedly begging for Ethiopian military assistance to defend and re-conquer Byzantium from the Turks. The list goes on and on. It is the single most pressing Latin Christian interest in Solomonic Ethiopia traceable for the 15th and early 16th century. Myth and misunderstanding – particularly relating to the figure of Prester John and all he and his empire evoked – thus necessarily influenced the very course of Solomonic and Latin diplomacy in the late Middle Ages.

¹⁵⁰ (Hingeston 1860, 419).

¹⁵¹ Compare British Library, Cotton MS Nero B XI, fol. 172r; ed. in (Hingeston 1860, 421–22).

¹⁵² Compare Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Ms. 2677, f. 54v.

¹⁵³ (Nogara and Biondo 1927, 26–27).

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