

THE QUEST FOR THE ETHIOPIAN PRESTER JOHN AND ITS ESCHATOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS*

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Resumen

El encuentro entre civilizaciones europeas y etíopes a principios de la Edad Moderna estuvo significativamente marcado por las expectativas europeas sobre la leyenda del Preste Juan, un poderoso gobernante cristiano oriental que ayudaría a los cristianos occidentales en su cruzada lucha contra los enemigos musulmanes. Después de recordar los pasos iniciales que, desde el siglo XIV, llevaron gradualmente a los autores europeos a cambiar la ubicación del Preste Juan desde Asia central a Etiopía, este artículo tiene la intención de arrojar cierta luz sobre las premisas escatológicas que inspiraron tanto la leyenda europea del preste Juan, como las tradiciones etíopes sobre el papel que el Negus y el Emperador romano tendrían para establecer un reino final de justicia y paz al final de los tiempos. Así, se comparan las fuentes más relevantes que resaltan el parentesco entre estas dos corrientes de pensamiento de la escatología cristiana, basadas en escritos seminales de la tradición siríaca derivados de las profecías del Pseudo-Methodio.

Palabras clave

Preste Juan, Escatología y Apocalipsis, Relaciones europeo-etíopes.

Abstract

The encounter between European and Ethiopian civilizations in early modern age was considerably marked by European expectations on the legend of Prester

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John, a mighty eastern Christian ruler who would help Western Christians in their crusading struggle against the Muslim foes. After recalling the main steps that gradually led European authors to shift the location of Prester John from Central Asia to Ethiopia since the fourteenth century, this article intends to cast light on the eschatological premises that inspired both the European legend of Prester John and the Ethiopian traditions centred around the role assigned to the *negus* and the Roman emperor in the establishment of a final kingdom of justice and peace at the end of times, by comparing the most relevant sources that highlight the kinship between these two streams of Christian eschatological thought, both grounded on seminal writings of the Syriac tradition derived from Pseudo-Methodius's *Revelationes*.

Keywords

Prester John, Eschatology and Apocalypticism, European-Ethiopian relations

Locating Prester John and his kingdom was a major challenge for Europeans between the Late Middle Ages and the early modern era. From the first appearance of this enigmatic ruler in the mid-twelfth century,¹ his figure triggered enthusiastic expectations of a possible and decisive ally in the crusaders' efforts to liberate the Holy Land: not only was he a mighty ruler, superior to every monarch on earth, as he claimed in the *Letter*² that he allegedly sent to the Byzantine emperor Manuel,³ but he was also a Christian and shared the same "crusading" intention of many Latin fighters who had crossed the Mediterranean. Indeed, as he claimed,

¹ For a general overview of this legend – not limited to its marvellous and legendary elements – see: Slessarev, 1959; Knefelkamp, 1986; Knefelkamp, 1988; von den Brincken, 1985; Zaganelli, 1988; *Prester John*, 1996; Baum, 1999; Bejczy, 2001; Giardini, 2016.

² The Latin and German versions of the *Letter of Prester John* are edited in Zarncke, 1879 and Wagner, 2000. French versions are edited in Gosman, 1982.

³ See in particular § 9 of the Latin letter: "Si vero vis cognoscere magnitudinem et excellentiam nostrae celsitudinis et in quibus terris dominetur potentia nostra, intellige et sine dubitatione crede, quia ergo, presbiter Iohannes, dominus sum dominantium et praecello in omnibus divitiis, quae sub caelo sunt, virtute et potentia omnes reges universae terrae" (in Zarncke, 1879, p. 910). All other first paragraphs of the *Letter*, however, are imbued with expressions of magnificence that mark the incomparable dignity of Prester John.

it is our intention to visit the Sepulchre of the Lord with a great army, for it is suitable for the glory of our majesty to humiliate and vanquish the enemies of the cross of Christ and to exalt his blessed name.⁴

The first sources that attest the existence of this Oriental monarch (respectively, Hugh of Jabala's account reported in Otto of Freising's *Chronica*⁵ and the more famous *Letter* of Prester John) inspired manifold attempts to solve the numerous riddles that were attached to this figure. In particular, many efforts were made to establish some kind of relationship with him, on both a diplomatic and military level, especially after the Fifth Crusade, when rumours about the imminent arrival of a "King David", "qui vulgariter appellatur Presbyter Johannes" (Jacques de Vitry), inflated the hope of the crusaders' camp for a decisive victory against the Muslim adversary.⁶ The legendary ruler did not appear, and the outcome of the Fifth Crusade in Damietta proved to be disastrous, but, from then on, a true "quest for Prester John" (that is, for potential Oriental allies in the struggle against the "infidels") began. This "quest" was profoundly influenced by the various developments of European geographical knowledge between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, and vice versa so that we may assume that attempts to locate the kingdom of Prester John during this long timespan represented a decisive factor eliciting the investigation of previously unknown portions of the earth.⁷

However, the search for this mysterious Eastern monarch was elicited not only for geographical or political-strategical purposes: in fact, as several scholars have pointed out in recent decades, the legend of Prester John conveyed surprising references to eschatological traditions which originated in Syriac environments at the dawn of the Islamic invasions and were rapidly transmitted to several Chris-

⁴ "In voto habemus visitare sepulchrum domini cum maximo exercitu, prout decet gloriam maiestatis nostrae humiliare et debellare inimicos crucis Christi et nomen eius benedictum exaltare" (§ II) in Zarncke, 1879, p. 910.

⁵ See Otto of Freising, 2011, pp. 556-8. On Hugh of Jabala and Otto of Freising's account, see Gosman, 1983; von den Brincken, 1973, pp. 382-8. See also Pelliot, 1951, pp. 1-43.

⁶ On the reception of Prester John's legend during the Fifth Crusade, see in particular: Zarncke, 1875; Pelliot, 1951, pp. 73-97 (now in *Prester John*, 1996, pp. 113-37); Richard, 1957; Bezzola, 1974, especially pp. 13-28; Gosman, 1989; Klopprogge, 1993, pp. 105-52; Richard, 1996; Aigle, 2014, pp. 41-65. See also von den Brincken, 1973, pp. 393-396; Möhring, 2000, pp. 188-93; Lewy, 2018, pp. 131-169.

⁷ For the importance of the quest for Prester John's realm in eliciting the European endeavour of discovery between the Late Middle Ages and the early modern age, see Beckingham, 1996a; Hamilton, 1996; Knobler, 2017, pp. 9-29. See also Pirenne, 1992, though the provisional state of the draft prepared by the author and later printed after her death presents several flaws that undermine its main thesis.

tian communities of the East and West alike. These traditions were centred on the future expectation of a “Last World Emperor” who would crush all unbelievers and establish a universal kingdom of peace and justice under the banner of the Christian religion just before the End of Times. As we shall try to show in this article, some eschatological implications of the legend of Prester John present remarkable affinities with similar conceptions scattered among Eastern Christian sources – especially those of Syriac and Coptic/Ethiopian origins – on the basis of the common “archetypical” expectation of a final ruler, of which the figure of Prester John can be understood, at least partly, as a very particular Western adaptation.⁸

At the beginning of his legend, it was a common assumption to represent Prester John as a mighty ruler over all “three Indies”, that is, over an enormous region, potentially extended to all of unknown Asia (whose actual contours were extremely uncertain to Europeans at that time).⁹ Notwithstanding this rather vague and undefined geographical location, Europeans tended to situate his abode in Far Eastern portions of the emerged lands, not far from the Earthly Paradise;¹⁰ as we shall see later in this article, this location was assumed at the beginning of the thirteenth century by the Crusaders in Damietta and by authors such as Jacob of Vitry and Oliver of Cologne who would exert a deep influence on the representation of the legend in subsequent decades. One of the main goals of the first missionary travels that took place after the Council of Lyon in 1245 was precisely to shed light on the regions where the mysterious “Indian” monarch was supposed to live. However, the new description of the central and far-eastern portions of the Asian continent provided by the missionaries was largely based on accurate and empiric observations; therefore, it laid the groundwork for the downsizing of several “marvellous” elements that had been associated with the East in previous centuries, including the most important aspects of the legend of Prester John.¹¹ Without dismissing it completely, authors such as William of

⁸ See Giardini, 2017. It is essential to note that the similarities of Christian expectations about the “Last World Emperor” scattered among different communities do not always presuppose an historical derivation. In the case of Prester John, in particular, the hypothesis of an Ethiopic inspiration of his legend has to be discarded, as we will try to show in the following pages.

⁹ On the fluid concept of the “three Indies” during the Middle Ages, see O’Doherty, 2013.

¹⁰ On the customary trend to locate India close to the Earthly Paradise during the Middle Ages, see the numerous cartographic examples discussed in Scafi, 2006, pp. 84-253.

¹¹ For the role played by the missionaries in providing a new representation of the eastern portions of Asia and its populations, see Bezzola, 1973, pp. 110-82; Fried, 1986; Klopprogge, 1993, pp. 187-257; Schmieder, 1994, especially pp. 198-327.

Rubruck and, later, Odorico of Pordenone dramatically reduced the expectations placed on him by identifying him with a Christian ruler who had been defeated and killed in the wars that he had had to face with Genghis Khan just before the Mongols' unstoppable onslaught westward.¹² His power had thus been destroyed or, at least, considerably reduced; besides, Latin missionaries assumed that Eastern Christian heretics had exaggerated the power of Prester John, thus making the expectations placed on him entirely unreasonable.¹³

As is well known from recent research, the first clear localization of Prester John's realm in "Ethiopia" has customarily been dated back to John of Carignano's account of the Ethiopian embassy to Genoa in 1306.¹⁴ Nevertheless, this source was transmitted only by a text by Giacomo Filippo Foresti almost two centuries later, in 1481, which, in all likelihood, may include forgeries: the passage in question, in fact, presents severe issues as to the reliability of its content in the light of our current knowledge of European-Ethiopian relations in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁵ In any case, the first explicit identification of Prester John with the king of Ethiopia was made by Jordan of Sévérac in 1328-30,¹⁶ whereas his first appearance in cartography dates back to Angelino Dulcert's portolan chart, drawn in 1339, only three years after the account of Jacob of Verona, an Augustinian pilgrim to the Holy Land who called Prester John "dominus Nubie et Ethiopie".¹⁷

"Ethiopian" characterizations of Prester John increased during the fourteenth century: we could mention here the description of Prester John as "the patriarch

¹² See in particular Bezzola, 1973, pp. 180-81; Baum, 1999, pp. 172, 198.

¹³ See Bezzola, 1973, pp. 156, 177, 180-81. In particular, William of Rubruck said in his *Itinerarium*, 17, 2, that "in quadam planicie inter illas alpes erat quidam nestorinus, pastor potens et dominus super populum qui dicebatur Naiman, qui erant christiani nestorini. Mortuo Coirchan [e.g. Gürkhan], elevavit se ille nestorinus in regem et vocabant eum nestoriani regem Iohannem, et plus dicebant de ipso in decuplo quam veritas esset. Ita enim faciunt nestoriani venientes de partibus illis, de nichilo enim faciunt magnos rumores" (in *Sinica Franciscana*, 1929, p. 206). Odorico of Pordenone stated it with even harsher words in his *Itinerarium* (32, 1): "veni versus terram Presticane, de quo non est centesima pars eius quod quasi pro certo dicitur de ipso" (in *Sinica Franciscana*, 1929, p. 342).

¹⁴ See Beckingham, 1996b. See also von den Brincken, 1967, pp. 331-332; von den Brincken, 2008, pp. 103-104.

¹⁵ See the objections on the authenticity of this record in Verena Krebs, forthcoming; Kurt, 2013, pp. 11-13.

¹⁶ "... ad Imperatorem Ethiopum, quem vos vocatis Prestre Johan," in Jordan Catalá, 2005, p. 259. However, the first localization of Prester John in Ethiopia must be dated before Jordan's work: in 1323, the Franciscan Symon Simeonis had already located him in that region: see Conte, 2012, p. 215; Lewy, 2018, pp. 192-193.

¹⁷ Jacob of Verona, 1950, p. 32. See Rouxpetel, 2012, p. 77.

of Nubia and Ethiopia” in the anonymous Franciscan *Libro del conocimiento de todos los reinos*, written in about 1350;¹⁸ in the remarks of another Franciscan, John of Marignolli, who, in his chronicle of 1352, affirms that

the Gyon river [...] surrounds the country of Ethiopia, where are only black men, and which is called the land of Prester John. It is thought that this river is the Nile, which descends to Egypt, across a place called Abascy, where are Christians of the apostle St. Matthew;¹⁹

and, finally, in the report of a Venetian merchant, called Bragadino, in *Le songe du vieil pèlerin*, written by Philippe de Mézières, former chancellor of king Peter I of Cyprus, according to which,

the realm of Nubia’s king, described as black as a Moor and ‘seigneur d’Ynde la Mineur et d’Ethyope,’ was said to adjoin Prester John’s territory.²⁰

In any case, we should be very careful not to confuse the “Ethiopianization” of Prester John – that is, the restriction of his kingdom to the region named “Ethiopia” during the Middle Ages, also called “India minor” or “India tertia” –²¹ with an actual “Africanization” of this ruler – that is, a clear-cut transfer of Prester John to the African continent as it is understood nowadays: in fact, the term “Ethiopia” carried very vague geographic meanings until at least the period of the Portuguese exploration of the Indian Ocean;²² moreover, it did not necessarily mean the eponymous African kingdom, but a large portion of the earth, divided

¹⁸ *Libro del conocimiento*, 1877, p. 63.

¹⁹ “Gyon, qui circuit terram Ethiopie, ubi sunt modo homines nigri, que dicitur terra Presbyteri Iohannis, et iste putatur esse Nylus, qui descendit in Egyptum per interruptionem factam in loco qui dicitur Abascy, ubi sunt Christiani sancti Mathei apostoli” (Giovanni de Marignolli, *Chronicon Bohemorum*, chapter 2 [on the Paradise], in Malfatto, 2013, p. 5), translated in English in Kurt, 2013, p. 6.

²⁰ Philippe de Mézières, 1969, p. 221, translated in English in Kurt, 2013, p. 6. For a general survey on the Ethiopian localization of Prester John, see Kurt, 2013, pp. 4-6.

²¹ “Il Medioevo distingueva un’*India prima, Secunda e Tertia*, oppure un’*India Superior, Inferior* o *Meridiana*, che corrispondono, grosso modo, all’India, alla regione compresa tra l’India e il Vicino Oriente e all’Etiopia (Zaganelli, 2000, p. 36). According to Orderic Vitalis, “Prima India ad Aethiopiam mittit, secunda ad Medos, tertia finem facit” (*Ecclesiastical History*, 2, 15, PL 188, 165b). See also von den Brincken, 1992, pp. 162-3. This tripartition drew on the geographic conception of Antiquity: “La plus grande partie de cet Orient est occupée par l’Inde, une Inde qui reste celle des géographes anciens: ceux-ci avaient imaginé de distinguer l’Inde d’en-deçà du Gange (*India inferior, Ynde la meneur*) de celle d’au-delà du fleuve (*India superior, Ynde la grant*). Ils donnaient en outre le nom d’Inde extrême (*India ultima*) aux contrées voisines de la Mer Rouge” (Richard, 1957, p. 226).

²² For the manifold meanings attached to the term “Ethiopia” (a term that could easily be exchanged with “Nubia”), see Lewy, 2018, pp. 35-64.

into several parts (generally three). Most of them were clearly located in Africa, but uncertainties as to the position of the “Ethiopia” that was east of Egypt remained up to the Late Middle Ages and the beginning of early modern age.²³

That the characterization of Prester John remained generally speaking “Indian” and not specifically “African” – at least until the first direct contacts of the Portuguese with the actual kingdom of Ethiopia – may be inferred from many literary works of the Late Middle Ages and the early modern era. In these, the traits of Prester John and his subjects (often embroidered with many other marvellous and legendary elements inherited from the encyclopaedic medieval tradition) were still associated with a traditional and rather conventional representation of “India,” understood as an enormous region that encompassed the border between Africa and Asia, on the one side, and the far-eastern part of the earth on the other.²⁴

²³ Jacob of Verona says that the Nubians of Prester John are called “cristiani Sancti Thome” (Jacob of Verona, 1950, p. 32). Now, to quote Camille Rouxpetel, “Afin de définir les Nubiens il utilise donc une tradition habituellement liée à l’Inde, l’apostolat de Thomas” (Rouxpetel, 2012, p. 77), whereas the apostle traditionally associated with the evangelization of Ethiopia or the regions south of Egypt was Matthew. After all, the Armenian prince Hethum had associated the Nubians with the missionary action of St. Thomas in Ethiopia (“regem Nubianorum, qui per beatum Thomam apostolum ad fidem Christi in Ethiopia sunt conversi:” Hethum, 1906, p. 358; see Seignobos, 2012, p. 60). But before the redaction of these sources, Jacob of Vitry had stated that many Christians lived in Nubia, “que contermina est Egypto”, in a vast part of Ethiopia, as well as in other lands up to India. “Omnes autem sunt christiani a beato Mattheo apostolo et aliis apostolicis viriis ad Christi fidem conversi” (Jacob of Vitry, 2008, pp. 304-307; see Seignobos, 2012, p. 56); furthermore, Burchard of Mount-Zion maintains that the part of Ethiopia south of Egypt “dicitur proprie Nubia et est tota christiana, in qua beatus Matheus predicavit” (in Omont, 1903, p. 500; see Seignobos, 2012, p. 57). In any case, notwithstanding these contradictory sources, it seems possible to infer that many medieval Christians considered “Nubia” as a land that occupied those parts of Ethiopia (intended as a region, not as a kingdom) inhabited by Christian people (also Angelino Dulcert associated the kingdom of Prester John with “Nubia,” by drawing a cross surmounted by three horizontal bars – an allusion to the papal *triregnum!* – in the land of Nubia, ruled by Senapus, “id est servus crucis:” see Vagnon, 2012, p. 35; Hoogvliet, 2007, p. 234). Therefore, the terms “Nubia” and “Ethiopia” will often be interchangeable (see Rouxpetel, 2012 and, from another point of view, Greisiger, 2007). In general, we may say that, for many medieval authors, “l’Asie commence donc à l’est du Nil, et s’étend jusqu’au *Sinarum sinus*, en englobant le *Mare Indicum*. L’ensemble des régions situées entre le Nil et la Chine appartient à l’Inde, qui occupe la majeure partie de l’Orient” (Rouxpetel, 2012, p. 75).

²⁴ Consequently, the location of Prester John’s realm in the Far Eastern regions of the earth was not to be dismissed completely up to the sixteenth century, notwithstanding the general consensus as to his identification with the Ethiopian king: see Hoogvliet, 2008, pp. 233-234. In fact, as already explained, the terms “India” and “Ethiopia” were almost entirely interchangeable. This consideration applies regardless of the fact that, starting from the Late Middle Ages, Europeans tended to

The definitive “Africanization” of Prester John in the sense previously indicated occurred when the Portuguese came to identify him with an individual who carried the same traits as other “ordinary” rulers, by contrast with the previous legend which credited him with rather “extraordinary” features.²⁵ Even worse, he proved to be a rather feeble ally²⁶ for the crusading activity that the Lusitanian kingdom had never ceased to foster in the early modern age:²⁷ to the point that it was the Portuguese soldiers who had to prevent the weak Ethiopian kingdom from being annihilated by its hostile Muslim neighbours.²⁸ The gradual erosion

represent Prester John and his subjects as having black skin – a feature more and more frequently attributed to African populations at the time: see for instance Kurt, 2013, p. 7; see also Salvadore, 2011, pp. 602, 607, 614, 617.

²⁵ On the new representation of Prester John after his identification with the historical *negus* of Ethiopia, see Kniefelkamp, 1986, pp. 107-135; Knobler, 2017, pp. 30-56.

²⁶ The downsizing of Prester John’s power was also related to the negative evaluation of his faith: accounts of Ethiopia multiply the references to his heretical beliefs. See in particular Ramos, 1998, especially pp. 246 (“Também o critério teológico como princípio de distinção sociológica se impôs progressivamente, à medida que os contactos directos se intensificavam: o *Negusa Negast* era cristão, sim, mas herético; e, na sociedade que ele governava, o cristianismo era permeável aos ritos hebraicos e às práticas muçulmanas”) and 247 (“A partir de meados do século XVI, tornava-se evidente, nos círculos do poder em Portugal, a inadequação do rei etíope em relação à imagem de poderio militar expressa na *Carta* e várias vezes retomada até ao princípio daquele século”). The process was set in motion by the report that Francisco Alvares delivered in Portugal after his sojourn in Ethiopia as an envoy sent by King Manuel I. To quote Matteo Salvadore, “already with Alvares’s return, the almighty Prester John, born of European imagination as an ideal Christian sovereign, had been transfigured into an African sovereign whose power and faith both were now questioned. Gone were the days of bold plans to take Jerusalem, of the mighty Prester John of European imagination” (Salvadore, 2017, p. 173). The account of Francisco Alvares, written in 1527, can be read in Alvares, 1961. On the process that led to the eclipse of the legend of Prester John, see also Salvadore, 2010. On the erosion of the legend of Prester John after the establishment of Portuguese-Ethiopian contacts, see also Kurt, 2013, pp. 21-23.

²⁷ See Pistarino, 1961. Of particular interest here is the bull *Romanus Pontifex*, issued by pope Nicholas V in 1454, in which the crusading overtones of the Portuguese explorations across the Indian Oceans were connected with the possible alliance with Christian communities in Asia: in this document (which recalls a homonymous bull written by Eugenius IV in 1436, which first established the rights of the Crown of Portugal over the new discovered lands), the pope was confident that Henrique, infante of Portugal, “would best perform his duty to God in this matter, if by his effort and industry that sea might become navigable as far as to the Indians who are said to worship the name of Christ, and that thus he might be able to enter into relation with them, and to incite them to aid the Christians against the Saracens and other such enemies of the faith” (translated in Salvadore, 2017, p. 84). The connection between the crusading effort against the “infidels” and an alliance with an Eastern Christian kingdom was an eschatological “pattern” since the birth of the legend of Prester John.

²⁸ This proved to be true during the confrontation during the Ethiopian-Adal war when the Muslim armies, led by Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, threatened with death the Ethiopian kingdom

of Prester John's Latin legend culminated thus with the insertion of the Abyssinian *negus* among the crowd of earthly kings and, consequently, with the complete removal of any marvellous attributes that had marked his legend since the twelfth century. At the dawn of the modern era, there was no longer a place for marvellous lands on earth (with the possible exception of America at the beginning of the sixteenth century),²⁹ that is, for regions in which the ordinary set of rules admitted by the natural sciences was not respected.³⁰ In a certain sense, the legend of Prester John was a notable victim of a process that led to a geographical "homogenization" in the perception of our globe – a process that could be profitably compared to the "homogenization" of the universe set in motion by the Copernican revolution.

Several scholars have maintained that the shifting of Prester John and of his kingdom to Ethiopia (or, rather, the reduction of his kingdom's extension solely to Ethiopia, that is, one of the "three Indies") already occurred in the aftermath of the Fifth Crusade.³¹ This assumption appears rather problematic because, as already mentioned, Prester John was still being located in the far-eastern regions

ruled at the time by Lebna Dengel: see Salvadore, 2017, pp. 180-184. The awareness of Portuguese military and technical superiority seems to be confirmed by the Ethiopian continuous requests for European artisans and craftsmen. As has been demonstrated recently, the main intent that pushed the Ethiopian sovereigns to obtain this transfer of technical knowledge (a process that was launched before the establishment of the first contacts with Portugal) was to furnish royal churches with artistic masterpieces: see Krebs, 2014, pp. 227-234. However, the possibility of improving Ethiopian military equipment was not completely overlooked. In any case, it was the Latin West, and not the Ethiopian kingdom, that made the overtures for a military alliance (see Krebs, 2014, pp. 176-ff.); therefore, it is not impossible to maintain that the Ethiopian sources were mirroring the language of the Portuguese on this very subject. On this topic, see also Salvadore, 2011, pp. 606-607, 611, 613-614, 624-625; Salvadore, 2017, pp. 26, 43, 129, 135-138, 145-146, 159; Knobler, 2017, pp. 37-39, 41-42.

²⁹ For the temporary transfer to the New World of *mirabilia* previously located in the East, see among others Gil, 1989.

³⁰ On this process, set in motion already in the Late Middle Ages, see Scafi, 2006, pp. 191-283; Giardini, 2016, pp. 87-92.

³¹ See for instance Richard, 1957, p. 230: "c'est [...] vers l'Éthiopie que Jacques de Vitry nous incite à regarder lorsqu'il nous rapporte qu'un de ses informateurs, un marchand, lui avait appris que les sujets du Prêtre Jean suivaient le rite copte; l'évêque d'Acre les croyait jusqu'alors nestoriens. Il était donc des gens pour identifier à l'Éthiopie le royaume du Prêtre Jean au moment même où la plupart des auteurs cherchaient ce royaume dans une autre direction". To tell the truth, Jean Richard was prone to believe that the legend of Prester John originated *from the beginning* from Ethiopia, and actually supported the thesis, already maintained by Constantine Marinescu, that the name of Prester John in its French rendition (*Jean*) originated as a deformation of the word "Žan", an Amharic designation of majesty (see Richard, 1957, p. 230; Marinescu, 1922. See also Marinescu, 1945). However, it is not possible to find occurrences of this word in the actual meaning indicated by Marinescu and Richard before the fifteenth century (see Knefelkamp, 1986, pp. 14-15, 17, 47; Gosman,

of the Asian continent throughout the thirteenth century, and the earliest identification of his kingdom with Ethiopia can be dated back only to the first half of the following century, that is, a century after the events that took place in Damietta.³²

At the same time, however, the vivid expectations triggered on that occasion decisively contributed to a major adaptation of the Latin legend of Prester John which originated through the crusaders' reception of some prophetic writings, the *Liber Clementis*, on the one hand, and the so-called *Prophecie de Hannan, le fil Ysaac* and the *Prophecy of Hannan son of Agap*, on the other hand,³³ all transmitted to the Franks through Syriac intermediaries and all closely related to the eschatological motifs that we are going to survey in following lines.³⁴ These prophecies are responsible for the introduction into Latin accounts of the motif – originally drawn from the Muslim tradition and later assumed within Ethiopian eschatology – according to which the “Ethiopian with two lean legs” (*Dhu'l Suwayqatayin al Habashi*) would destroy Mecca at the end of time.³⁵ However, the eschatological elements present in the above-mentioned prophecies and eagerly applied to Prester John during the Fifth Crusade extended far beyond this specific motif, as we shall try to demonstrate in the following lines.

That the figure of this legendary eastern monarch is marked by apocalyptic traits is an assumption that has been investigated in depth only recently.³⁶ None-

1982, pp. 26-27, 537. See also Caquot, 1957, pp. 211-2, who still maintains the origin of Prester John's name from the word “Žan,” notwithstanding its much later appearance as a word of majesty).

³² For a general refutation of the Ethiopian origin of the legend of Prester John, see Lewy, 2018, pp. 252-256.

³³ While there is a general consensus identifying the *Prophecy of Hannan son of Agap* as a different rendition of the *Prophecie de Hannan, le fil Ysaac*, Mordechay Lewy carefully distinguishes them as different prophetic writings: see Lewy, 2018, pp. 161-183.

³⁴ The main Latin authors who report the discovery of these writings are Jacob of Vitry, who deals extensively with these prophecies in his *Epistola VII*, 535-60 (in Jacob of Vitry, 1960, p. 152) and the *Historia Damiatina* by Oliver of Cologne, 1894. For the reception of these works among the crusaders, see Pelliot, 1951, pp. 73-97; Bezzola, 1973, pp. 13-28; Klopprogge, 1993, pp. 106-152. See also Conti Rossini, 1921, pp. 32-35.

³⁵ See Lewy, 2018, pp. 65-76 (for the presence of this eschatological motif in various Muslim ahadith), 94-95 (for a discussion on the adoption of this motif within Ethiopic eschatological texts), 169-188 (for the reception of this motif in Latin writings during the Fifth Crusade), and 189-236 (for further speculations on the crusading role assigned to the Ethiopian – or Nubian – king in Latin Christianity up to the fifteenth century).

³⁶ Especially in the above-mentioned works by Gosman, 1982, Bejczy, 2001, and, more recently, Giardini, 2016. See also Potestà, 2014, pp. 115-122. Hannes Möhring, in his reference book on the “Last World Emperor” prophecy, still questions the eschatological inspiration of the legend of Prester John, at least in its origins: see Möhring, 2000, p. 172.

theless, very few studies have been devoted to examining how this Latin legend (at least some aspects of it) originated out of a more general set of eschatological ideas that were already widespread among various Eastern Christian communities, including Copts and Ethiopians.³⁷ Such a “convergence” of conceptions (of which Europeans were naturally unaware), aside from the disillusionment over the possibility of finding valiant allies among the Mongols for the crusading effort,³⁸ may be a significant reason that “directed” the attempts to locate Prester John in what was the kingdom of Ethiopia in the fifteenth century when contacts with its inhabitants and representatives intensified.³⁹ Thanks to the establishment of closer relations, accounts of Ethiopian eschatological beliefs could have made their way to a European audience; similarities between them and older expectations of Prester John may thus have aroused the hope that the discovery of the mighty ruler who would help the Latins defeat the Muslim enemy was at hand.

The common set of eschatological ideas toward which both Europeans and Ethiopians converged are clearly to be ascribed to the Syriac tradition conveyed by Pseudo-Methodius’s *Revelationes* whose fortune spread among almost all Christian communities – from the Syriac to the Latin, as well as the Egyptian and Ethiopian ones –⁴⁰ and assumed various elements drawn from other authoritative Syriac sources – especially the *Cave of Treasures*⁴¹ and the legend of

³⁷ See Kampers, 1896, pp. 78-82; Kampers, 1901, pp. 99-100; Slessarev, 1959, pp. 80-92; Giardini, 2017, pp. 226-229. All of these writings, however, deal only with the comparison of the Prester John legend with Syriac sources. The principal references for the reception of these apocalyptic themes within the Coptic literature are still the works by Martínez, 1985, especially pp. 247-590 (on the Sahidic Apocalypse of the Pseudo-Athanasius); and Martínez, 1990.

³⁸ See Knobler, 2017, p. 30: “Following the failure of Western-Mongol diplomacy to achieve any fruition, the geographical locus of Latin anti-Muslim alliance and the search for Prester John shifted from Central Asia to Northeast Africa.”

³⁹ For details on the various European attempts to establish direct contacts with the Ethiopian Prester John between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries, see Kurt, 2013; Salvatore, 2011; Salvatore, 2017.

⁴⁰ On the text of Pseudo-Methodius’s *Apocalypse*, see Martínez, 1985, pp. 2-246; Pseudo-Methodius, 1993. For its Western translations, see Pseudo-Methodius, 1998; see also Prinz, 1985. Among the copious scholarly literature on this prophecy, see Reinink, 1984; Reinink, 1988; Reinink, 1992; Möhring, 2000; Potestà, 2011; Potestà, 2014. For reception of Pseudo-Methodius among Coptic works, see Martínez, 1985; Martínez, 1990; Piovanelli, 2013. See also Lapchik Minski 2016.

⁴¹ The text in *Cave of the Treasures*, 1987. See also Monneret de Villard, 1952; Su-Min Ri, 2000; Toepel, 2006; Sergey Minov, 2013; Minov, 2017.

Alexander⁴² – that would play a considerable role in shaping later eschatological representations.⁴³

A rapid comparison of sources will demonstrate this assumption and allow us to appreciate the remarkable convergence between Latin and Ethiopian expectations. The first source to be considered is, naturally, Pseudo-Methodius's *Revelationes* itself, according to which a "king of the Greeks" will attack the "Ishmaelites" from the "sea of the Kushites", while the "sons of the king of the Greeks" will attack them "from the Western lands".⁴⁴ Very similar to Pseudo-Methodius is an almost contemporary Edessan Apocalypse,⁴⁵ which draws extensively on the previous text and even more synthetically predicts that "the king of the Greeks will come out from the West, and his son from the South," marching together against the Muslims.⁴⁶ There is an interesting inversion of the two kings' provenance which probably bears witness to diverging interpretations among Christian communities on the eschatological role assigned to different rulers, probably

⁴² For the text, see *Alexanderlied*, 1889; *Alexanderlied*, 1983). See also Gero, 3-9; Ciancaglini, 2001; Reinink, 2003; Monferrer-Sala, 2011; Sidarus, 2011; Kotar, 2013; Stoneman, 2017.

⁴³ In this context, it could be useful to underline the closeness between the European and the Ethiopic representation of the Magi, due to their common derivation from the *Cave of Treasures* and other Syriac writings (such as the *Life of Adam and Eve* and the so-called *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, which presents close similarities to the Latin *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*: see Monneret de Villard, 1952, pp. 52-53): that is the case, for instance, of the gifts ("gold namely as unto a king; frankincense, as unto God; and myrrh, as for His death," an interpretation that was well rooted since the third century) stored by Adam in the Cave of Treasures, on the slopes of the Mountain of Paradise, and subsequently carried by the Magi to Palestine; of the regal dignity of the Magi; of their secret astronomical and natural knowledge, handed down to them by Seth's descendants; of the Virgin with the Child visible as the prompt that leads the Magi to Bethlehem (see Witakowski, 1999, pp. 71-2, 79-80, 82-3, 87). According to Hugh of Jabala/Otto of Freising, the Magi were the ancestors of Prester John ("Fertur enim iste de antiqua progenie illorum, quorum in Evangelio mentio fit, esse magorum eisdemque, quibus et illi, gentibus imperans tanta gloria et habundantia frui, ut non nisi sceptre smaragdino uti dicatur," Otto of Freising, 2011, pp. 556-558); a tight connection between the Magi and Prester John – though not always presented as a proper kinship – was to be taken up by later renditions of his legend, including the famous *Historia Trium Regum* by Johannes of Hildesheim (see Johannes of Hildesheim, 1886, pp. 255, 258-9). For the reception of the legend of Prester John in Johannes of Hildesheim's work, see Giardini, 2017, pp. 219-222. On Johannes's re-elaboration of Eastern traditions, see Schilling, *Mögliches*, 2014.

⁴⁴ Pseudo-Methodius, *Revelationes*, 13, translated into English by Martínez, 1985, p. 149. See Möhring, 2000, p. 65. For Reinink, 1984, pp. 198-199, the "sons of the king of the Greeks" refer to Byzantine people as a whole, rather than to his physical offspring. If this is the actual meaning of this expression, it is possible to observe a slight change of its signification in subsequent elaborations.

⁴⁵ The edition in Martínez, 1985, pp. 222-246. See also Suermann, 1985, pp. 162-171; Reinink, 1990; Möhring, 2000, pp. 107-119.

⁴⁶ Martínez, 1985, p. 233. See also Möhring, 2000, p. 107. See also Piovaneli, 2013, pp. 24-27.

due to diverging confessional beliefs. It is interesting to notice, however, that for Pseudo-Methodius it was the “king of the Greeks” who would emerge from the southern regions and attack from the “sea of the Kushites”, thus suggesting an identification with a monarch coming from the lands south of Egypt – an identification that could easily point to the kingdoms of “Ethiopia”, that is, the Nubian (probably the best interpretation, since it is the most consistent with previous eschatological texts produced in the Syriac environment)⁴⁷ or the Axumite one. In any case, it is noteworthy that the “king of the Greeks” is presented by Pseudo-Methodius’s narrative as the offspring of Kūshat, the daughter of the legendary Ethiopian king Pīl, who would bear Alexander the Great – the first prefiguration of the “Last World Emperor” –⁴⁸ and be the mother of the rulers of various imperial cities.⁴⁹ The final abdication of the “Last World Emperor” is intentionally presented as the fulfilment of the prophecy conveyed in Psalm 68:31 according to which “Ethiopia will precede, and hand over [or surrender] its power to God.” It is Pseudo-Methodius himself who underlines the interconnection between both Greek and Ethiopian (or Kushite) kingships:

Alas, many brothers among the children of the Church have thought that the blessed David (writing the Scriptural excerpt in question) made this statement about the kingdom of the Kūshites. However, those who thought these things were mistaken. It concerns the kingdom of the Greeks, which is from the lineage of Kūshat, and holds what was erected in the centre, that is, the Holy Cross [the symbol of the imperial victory]. It was about it that the blessed David said: ‘Kush will surrender to God’. There is not, therefore, a nation or kingdom under the heavens that could overcome the kingdom of the Chris-

⁴⁷ See Greisiger, 2007.

⁴⁸ On the role assumed by Alexander the Great as a precursor or an image of the “Last World Emperor,” see Reinink, 1999. See also Reinink, 1985.

⁴⁹ “When Alexander, the first king of the Greeks, died, [...] Kūshat, Alexander’s mother, returned to Kūsh, to her father’s house. And Būz, the king who build Byzantium, [...] wrote him [Pīl, king of the Kūshites] concerning his daughter, Alexander’s mother, to take her as wife and make her a queen. [...] And the king of the Greeks took Kūshat, daughter of Pīl, king of the Kūshites, and a daughter was born to him from her. He gave her the name Byzantiyā, because of the name of the city which he had built. And Romulos, king of the Romans, took Byzantiyā as wife. Three sons, Romulos, Urbanus, and Claudius, were born to Romulos from Byzantiyā, the daughter of Būz, king of Byzantium. She herself was born from Kūshat, mother of Alexander the king. [...] The progeny of Queen Kūshat, daughter of Pīl, king of the Kūshites, seized the kingdom of the Macedonians, and of the Romans, and of the Greeks – to belong forever to the progeny of Kūshat, Pīl’s daughter” (Pseudo-Methodius, *Revelationes*, 8, translated in English in Martínez, 1985, pp. 134-136).

tians, as long as it takes refuge in the living Cross, which was set up in the middle of the earth and upholds the heights and the depths.⁵⁰

In other words, it seems possible to maintain that, in the last Christian monarch, the “Roman” and the “Ethiopian” figures are interwoven, making it impossible to distinguish between their respective providential functions.

The same motif of both kings of the Greeks and of Ethiopia cooperating for the final defeat of the Muslims appeared in later Coptic apocalyptic texts, as Martínez already demonstrated in his seminal work on this subject.⁵¹ Interestingly enough, the majority of these prophetic works do not limit themselves to presenting a victorious joint campaign of the “Roman” (that is Byzantine) and “Ethiopian” kings against the Muslim foes but also add a detail retained in later Ethiopian sources: both rulers would discuss matters of faith and settle their doctrinal divisions, with the Byzantine ruler accepting the Nicene but anti-Chalcedonian creed professed by the Ethiopian king. Only then could the “king of the Greeks” fulfil his mission and inaugurate the kingdom of peace and justice already predicted by Pseudo-Methodius (whereas the Ethiopian king disappears from the scene).⁵² According to the Arabic *Apocalypse of Samuel of Cala-*

⁵⁰ Pseudo-Methodius, *Revelationes*, 9, translated in English in Martínez, 1985, p. 136. See Piovanelli, 2013, pp. 13-14. Besides, drawing on the Syriac version of the Bible, the *Peshitta*, Pseudo-Methodius could be combining Psalm 68:31 with 1 Cor. 15:24: “Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom of God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power”: Bonura, 2016, pp. 87-88, in particular 88: “Pseudo-Methodius combines Psalm 68:31 with 1Cor 15:24 to provide the prophecy which he argues that the Last Emperor will fulfil. It is the scriptural basis for the Last Emperor’s surrender of his crown to God”. Thus, the author of the Syriac *Revelationes* is establishing an interesting correspondence between the kingdoms of Christ and of the Last World Emperor, both characterized by the same feature. The idea that the “Last World Emperor” shares in the same regal dignity of Christ and therefore holds a “vicarial” function in relation to his kingship is thus enhanced. On the doctrinal aspects of this prophecy, see Giardini, 2014.

⁵¹ See above, n. 34. However, not all eschatological elements present in the Ethiopian writings actually stem from Pseudo-Methodius, as Mordechay Lewy has recently argued with reference to the motif of the Abyssinian destroyer of Mecca (directly derived from the Muslim tradition): see Lewy, *Der apokalyptische Abessinier*, 89, 91, 97. However, in the formation of Coptic eschatology, it seems possible to admit a conflation among different apocalyptic traditions; in this process, Pseudo-Methodius’s *Revelationes* play an essential inspirational role.

⁵² See the helpful synthesis offered by Martínez, 1990, p. 249: after the victorious outcome of the battle against the Muslims, to which both kings of Rome and Ethiopia take part, “peace is established for the whole Church. In some works, before the beginning of the peace, a conference is held between the two kings on the subject of the orthodox faith, resulting in a divine judgement that sanctions the faith of the Coptic Church as against the Chalcedonian confession held by the Byzantines.”

mun,⁵³ supposedly written in the seventh century, “the Muslims will flee to the desert where they had been before,⁵⁴ escaping from the king of Ethiopia coming from the East, and from the king of Rūm [...]. He will destroy them from the West”.⁵⁵

In this case, the provenance of the king of Ethiopia resembles the texts discovered in Damietta in the thirteenth century;⁵⁶ the fact that an “Ethiopian king” comes from the “East” may well confirm the extremely vague and indefinite location of the “Ethiopian” region, even from an Egyptian standpoint. In any case, after their victory,

the king of Ethiopia will marry the daughter of the king of Rūm, and there will be a great peace, reconciliation and agreement all over the earth for forty years,⁵⁷

a possible reference to the settlement of all religious disputes.

⁵³ Edited in Ziadeh, 1915-17.

⁵⁴ This detail is consistent with Pseudo-Methodius who points out that the “Ishmaelites” come from Yathrib, the ancient name for Madina; according to the apocalyptic account, before their final annihilation, the “Last World Emperor” would repel the Ishmaelites to their native abode in the desert (see Möhring, 2000, pp. 60, 65), thus emulating the deed of a king of the past, Samsishaib, ruler of the Indian realm set out by Yonton, the fourth son of Noah, introduced in the *Cave of Treasures*, from which Pseudo-Methodius’s *Revelationes* draw abundantly. On the connections between the Last World Emperor and these figures of Indian kingship in the Syriac sources, see Giardini, 2016, p. 254; Giardini, 2017, pp. 228-229.

⁵⁵ Ziadeh, 1915-1917, p. 390, lines 11-4, quoted from Martínez, 1990, p. 249.

⁵⁶ In particular, the *Liber Clementis* foretold the coming of a “king from the West” – whom the crusaders eagerly identified with Frederick II – and a “king from the East,” who would eradicate Islam and conquer Jerusalem together: after the fall of Damietta, in fact, Jacob of Vitry said that “de duobus regibus novis subiungit, quorum unus venturus est a partibus Occidentis, alium a partibus Orientis obviam predicto regi in civitatem sanctam venturum predixit et quod per manus regum predictorum Dominus abhominabilem impiorum hominum legem exterminaturus esset, multis ex ipsis gladio interemptis, aliis ad fidem Christi conversis ut intraret plenitudo gentium” (*Epistula VII*, 548-53, in *Lettres de Jacques de Vitry*, 152). See also the *Prophecy of Hanman son of Agap*, in its French version: “En chel termine venra uns rois d’outre les mons [who could easily be understood as a king *d’outremer*: see Pelliot, 1951, pp. 88-89] de grant force & de grant sens & de grant richoise, li miudres de tous les rois. Cil rois ira a Damas & le gastera & prendra Maubec & Haman & le remanant de toute le terre;” later on, “venra uns rois de Calabre [a toponym interpreted by Pelliot as a deformation of the Latin epithet *rex de Alberi*, i.e. “king of Abyssinia”: see Pelliot, 1951, p. 85], uns rois de Crestiens, & s’en ira en Inde & si abatera Mech & l’empire Mahomet & jetera de son siege & de sa mahomerie quanques il i trovera.” In the end, “cil rois en ira en Jerusalem & le trovera tote gastée. Et la s’assembleront ensamble li doi roi d’outre les mons qui avra pris Damas, & venront ensamble au Temple & au Sepulcre, & la s’aquemenieront ensamble, & demeront grant joie, il & lor gens, & grant amistiés [i.e.] entr’aus a tous jors mais” (Röhricht, 1879, pp. 212-213). The similarities with the Coptic texts illustrated above are evident. For further information on the “two kings” motif in the prophetic writings circulating in Damietta during the Fifth Crusade, see Pelliot, 1951, pp. 83-4, 89-97; Giardini, 2017, pp. 204-205.

⁵⁷ Ziadeh, 1915-1917, p. 390, lines 22-6, quoted from Martínez, 1990, p. 249.

If we now consider the Arabic “Letter of Pseudo-Pisentius,”⁵⁸ presumably written in the mid-tenth century, we find a king of Rūm called Constantine – a clearly “imperial” name⁵⁹ that does not necessarily refer to a historical character – who recovers Egypt from the Muslims.⁶⁰ At this time,

the king of Ethiopia (who had not taken part in the military campaign) will arise; he will come to meet the king of Rūm. They will sit together for a few days, arguing with one another about the orthodox faith.⁶¹

Great wars will break out, and only the intervention of the Patriarch of Alexandria will settle the dispute. After the conversion of the “king of the Greeks” to the Nicene faith, “agreement and great peace will come all over the earth”⁶² (exactly as in the Arabic *Apocalypse of Samuel of Calamun*).

There will be upon the earth great peace, as in the reign of Constantine the righteous. It will last for forty years [the same length as in the Sahidic Apocalypse of Pseudo-Athanasius], and the peace of the Lord will rule the earth.⁶³

The Arabic Second *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Athanasius*,⁶⁴ was probably redacted during the time of the Crusades.⁶⁵ It conveys specific motifs that we can trace in other Latin and Ethiopic sources. According to this Apocalypse, the Muslims would be destroyed by internal civil wars.

The kings of Nubia and Ethiopia will hear (of these revolts) and come out, ruling over the whole land of Yemen, and coming to Egypt. They will find it (Egypt) devastated.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Edited in Périer, 1914.

⁵⁹ Just like the “Constans” of the *Vaticinium of Constans* included in the prophecy of the *Sibylla Tiburtina* (on which see Holdenried, 2006), which was however probably redacted in the same Syriac environments of the seventh century that inspired Pseudo-Methodius’s *Revelations*. See Potestà, 2011.

⁶⁰ Not by chance, in almost all these Coptic apocalypses, the centre of the eschatological scenario is Egypt, a land where the final victory of the “Last World Emperor” will occur. Jerusalem, however, is not ruled out, for in many apocalyptic writings it is presented in any case as the capital of the final kingdom of justice and peace.

⁶¹ Périer, 1914, p. 309, lines 20–310, line 7, quoted from Martínez, 1990, p. 250.

⁶² Périer, 1914, p. 312, lines 17–313, line 3, quoted from Martínez, 1990, pp. 250–251.

⁶³ Périer, 1914, p. 312, lines 17–313, line 3, quoted from Martínez, 1990, p. 251.

⁶⁴ MS Vat. ar. 158, ff. 99v–111v and MS Paris ar. 153, ff. 461v–70v, mentioned in Graf, 1944, p. 277. See also Monferrer-Sala, 2016.

⁶⁵ See Lewy, 2018, p. 91, who tentatively understands the conquest of Constantinople mentioned in this *Apocalypse* as a reference to the Fourth Crusade.

⁶⁶ MS Vat. ar. 158, f. 107r, quoted from Martínez, 1990, p. 251.

Such news was then heard by “the king of the Franks” (*malik al-ifranj*), once again called Constantine; after conquering Constantinople, he would take the Cross (a clear reference to the Crusades) and come to the devastated Jerusalem. At this time, the king of Rūm would accept reconciliation with the King of Ethiopia in Egypt, and his conversion to the Orthodox faith is presented in quite a similar way to the account in the Letter of Pisentius.⁶⁷ The travel of the “king of the Greeks” is conceived as the fulfilment of a prophecy contained in Psalm 68:31, the same verse that had inspired Pseudo-Methodius. Moreover, in this case as well, the prophecy is interpreted as an allusion to “reconciliation” between the Roman and Ethiopian kingdoms.

The faith and the divine love will become stable between the kings, the peoples and the nations. They will go to Jerusalem (the city of the king of Rūm) and God will reveal the crown that had come down from heaven. One single king will be established among them, namely Constantine.⁶⁸

In the *Visions of Shenute*, probably redacted in their final version in the first half of the fifteenth century,⁶⁹ the doctrinal disagreements are settled before the

⁶⁷ MS Vat. ar. 158, ff. 107v-109r, quoted from Martínez, 1990, p. 251.

⁶⁸ MS Vat. ar. 158, f. 109v, quoted from Martínez, 1990, p. 251. Constantine is referred to here as “the lion’s whelp,” a motif that appears also in the “Rolls of Pseudo-Clemens” (see later, n. 79). It is easy to detect here a reference to the biblical “Lion of Judah,” explicitly named “young lion” in Genesis 49:9, who would be understood traditionally as Jesus in the Christian tradition, and would often be closely associated with the Abyssinian monarchy on the basis of the special election of the Ethiopian kings (see Caquot, 1957, p. 211). Interestingly enough, in the Second *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Athanasius*, the “lion’s whelp” is associated with the “king of the Franks:” it would be tempting to see here a connection with the European prophecy of the “Second Charlemagne”, a specific Late medieval development of the “Last World Emperor” prophecy, in which the last French monarch who would rule all over the earth is presented as a “lion.” This description, however, appears quite late, in the *Regnabit Menfridus* prophecy, recorded by the Minorite Chronicle of Erfurt under the year 1268, where the “rex ultramontanus” who fights against Manfred is called “Leo Francie.” This symbolism would later be taken up several times within prophetic texts both favourable and unfavourable to the kingdom of France, like the *Veniet aquila* prophecy, some revelations of St. Bridget and Lichtenberger’s prophecy on Charles V: see Töpfer, 1964, pp. 172-73; Reeves, 1969, pp. 333-334, 339; Möhring, 2000, pp. 242-243, 244; Kneupper, 2016, pp. 130, 134, 138. For other examples of French kings associated with the lion – often with “crusading” references and eschatological implications –, see Jäckel, 2006, pp. 96-105, 256-259.

⁶⁹ See Lewy, 2018, p. 102.

military campaign against the Muslims.⁷⁰ After the conference, we find the usual picture:

Woe to the city of Mecca on that day, because of the multitude of the troops of the king of Ethiopia [...]. The standard of this king will be all beauty, straight and high. He will substitute the king of Egypt, take his wife captive with him, and place another instead of him. On his way home, he will come to the river Geyōn, to take the tribute from Egypt, and the king of Rōmē will rule over Jerusalem. And the standard of this king will be beautiful and high, and he will bear the sign of the cross in the midst of his chest [...]. At that time, the demons will be in chains for forty years. Rest, joy and peace will rule over the whole world,⁷¹

just as in the previous Coptic texts examined above. The traits of both kings are the same here, and it is quite tempting to understand the “king of the Greeks” and the “king of Ethiopia” as the doubling of a common archetypal ruler, the “Last World Emperor,” with the same essential traits as presented in Pseudo-Methodius.

Moreover, in the final chapter of the *Kebra Nagast*, the most famous piece of Ethiopian epic based on the legendary “Solomonic” ancestry of the Ethiopian kingdom, probably written in its final version during the reign of ‘Amda Seyon I, between 1314 and 1322,⁷² the cooperation between the two kings is further strengthened by the fact that the king of Rum and the king of Ethiopia are of the same lineage, thanks to their common ancestors David and Solomon:⁷³

And those two kings, Justinus the King of Rome and Kaleb the King of Ethiopia, met together in Jerusalem [...]. They were to be mingled with David and Solomon their fathers. The one whom in faith they chose by lot to be named from the Kings of Rome was to be called the ‘King of Ethiopia,’ and the King of Rome likewise was to bear the name of ‘King of Ethiopia’.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ See *Visions of Shenute*, 1913, pp. 255-261; more recently, Grypeou, 2007. See also Derat, 2012, p. 134.

⁷¹ Grohmann, *Visions of Shenute*, pp. 261-265, translated into English in Martínez, 1990, p. 252. Interestingly enough, §§ 35-36 go on to affirm that “all human beings will be part of God’s Paradise, may He accept us all, amen. And whoever dies in this time, will pass away without affliction, because all sins and every wrongdoing will be remitted.”

⁷² Text in *Kebra Nagast*, 2010. See also Bezold, 1905; Hubbard, 1956.

⁷³ In the context of *Kebra Nagast*’s narrative, the enemy of both kings is a Jewish ruler rather than a Muslim one. However, this does not alter the meaning of the eschatological pattern in question.

⁷⁴ § 117, in *Kebra Nagast*, 2010, p. 226. Here, in a legendary and eschatological fashion, the *Kebra Nagast* elaborates the actual historical alliance established in 525-526 between the Roman emperor Justin and the Axumite king Kaleb against the Hymiarite ruler (see Lusini, 2001, pp.

Such kinship could not but recall the similar affinity that tied the “king of the Greeks” to the Ethiopian monarchy in Pseudo-Methodius’s *Revelationes*, where Kūšyat, daughter of king Pil of Kush (that is, of a kingdom located south of Egypt, customarily equated with Ethiopia or Nubia), after the death of her first husband Philip of Macedonia and her first son Alexander the Great, marries Romulus, king of the Romans, from whence the offspring of the Last World Emperor stems.⁷⁵

It is now time to consider the so-called *Rolls of Pseudo-Clemens* (in Arabic *Kitab al-Majall*). This allows us to draw a connection between the Coptic tradition just surveyed in the previous pages and the European legend outlined in the first part of this article: in fact, part of the content conveyed by the *Rolls* flowed into the Syriac text, customarily called the *Liber Clementis*, which triggered a powerful set of eschatological expectations during the Fifth Crusade.⁷⁶ The Arabic version, written in its first version in Coptic environments of the tenth century,⁷⁷ and subsequently introduced into Ethiopia in the thirteenth century,⁷⁸ portrays the wars led by a “king of the South” and a “king of the East,” the frightening consequences of this campaign for Egypt, the destruction of Damascus and the liberation of the Christians through a victorious “lion’s whelp” (just as in the Second Arab *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Athanasius*).⁷⁹ Very similar motifs would reappear in the Latin sources written by witnesses to the siege of Damietta⁸⁰ who eagerly applied the prophetic lines conveyed by the sources transmitted to them by Syriac intermediaries to the very events that were unfolding before their eyes – with the notable exception of religious reconciliation through the conversion

49-52). On the basis of the reference to this historical fact, Irfan Shahid assumes that the core of the *Kebra Nagast* was written in the sixth century (see Shahid, 1976, pp. 173-178), a thesis that has been contested more than once (see Munro-Hay, 2001; *Martyrdom of Aretha*, 2006, pp. 105-106; Piovanelli, 2013, pp. 21-33). The kinship between the two Roman and Ethiopian kings is just one of the many similarities between the *Kebra Nagast* and Pseudo-Methodius’s *Revelationes* (see Caquot, 1983; Caquot, 1990; Caquot, 1994).

⁷⁵ See above, n. 49. On the kinship between the Roman and the Ethiopian kingships in Pseudo-Methodius, see Möhring, 2000, pp. 62-63; Lewy, 2018, pp. 79-80.

⁷⁶ For this Arabic text, see Georg Graf, 1944, pp. 283-292.

⁷⁷ For the various versions of this writing, see Lewy, 2018, pp. 134-139.

⁷⁸ See *Qalementos*, 1992. On the eschatological elements of the Ethiopian version, see Lewy, 2018, p. 98.

⁷⁹ See above, n. 68. For the “lion’s whelp” in the *Rolls of Pseudo-Clemens*, see Lewy, 2018, pp. 91, 149.

⁸⁰ Once again, Egypt was at the centre of the drama just as in the events foretold by the Coptic eschatological writings mentioned so far (see above, n. 60) – but this time before the very eyes of the Europeans!

of the “Roman king” to the Nicene but anti-Chalcedonian creed,⁸¹ a motif, however, that may actually be present in the Prophecy of Agap, though considerably softened.⁸² It is noticeable that all the details reported here can be easily matched with passages drawn from previous Coptic apocalypses.

⁸¹ That is, the profession of faith maintained by Eastern Christian communities – including the Coptic one – which accepted the decrees of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325) while refusing those of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451. Keeping and defending religious orthodoxy was to be considered as the most prominent task of the Ethiopian monarchy, especially at the time of Zar’a Ya’qob, when the life of “Yemrehanna Krestos,” a true priest-king, was written. As Marie-Laure Derat has convincingly argued, it is not possible to see in this figure the precursor of the Latin Prester John since the representation of his priestly dignity serves completely different purposes, notably the celebration of the special election of the Ethiopian king as keeper of orthodoxy (see Derat, 2012; on the role of the Ethiopian king as keeper and guardian of the orthodox Miaphysite doctrine, see also Derat, 2010, especially pp. 176-181; Caqout, 1957, pp. 213-214; on the confrontation with the Roman church at the time of the Council of Ferrara-Florence on the matter of orthodoxy, see Weber, 2010). There is however another remarkably similar element that points to the previously examined apocalypses: during his reign, in fact, “la foi serait orthodoxe, et sous son règne, les gens de Rome se soumettront à ceux d’Éthiopie” (Derat, 2012, p. 131, quoting Marrassini, 1995, p. 79), evidently in the religious meaning. The victory of Nicene orthodoxy, which had already played a fundamental role in previous Coptic prophecies, is now elevated to the most essential trait that reveals the eschatological function of the Ethiopian kingship. To quote Marie-Laure Derat, if Yemrehanna Krestos “est présenté dans ses actes comme un *rex sacerdos*, c’est qu’il destiné à assurer une mission d’importance: sous son règne, le ‘roi de Rome’ se soumettra au roi d’Éthiopie. Il s’agit d’une référence à un motif bien connu des apocalypses chrétiennes rédigées à partir du VII^e siècle, en syriaque et en arabe, dans lequel le souverain d’Éthiopie joue un rôle essentiel dans l’économie du salut. Il est le souverain qui conservera l’orthodoxie après le concile de Chalcédonie et qui fera revenir le roi de Rome (Byzance) à cette orthodoxie avant la fin des temps” (Marie-Laure Derat, 2012, p. 138).

⁸² See above, n. 52. It is noticeable that all the details reported in this prophecy can be easily matched to passages drawn from previous Coptic apocalypses. As for the rendition of the same prophecy in the *Liber Clementis*, see also Aubry of Trois-Fontaines: “Notabatur etiam in illa prophetia, quod a parte orientali debet venire quidam rex, qui vocabitur nomine David, et a parte occidentali debet venire alius rex, qui terram Sarracenorum usque Ierusalem destruet” (*Chronica Alberici monachi Trium Fontium*, ed. Paul Scheffer-Boichorst, in MGH SS 23, 910). See also Oliver of Cologne: “Sane post captam Damiatam legatus apostolice sedis [Pelagius] recitari fecit in auribus multitudinis summatim et interpretative librum arabice scriptum, cuius considerantes et contemplantes ligaturam cum cartis, vetustum invenimus eundem. Qui Liber Clementis intitatur, scriptus, ut aiunt, ab ore principis apostolorum ab ipso Clemente de revelationibus factis Petro inter resurrectionem et ascensionem a Domino. Incipit autem liber iste a creatione mundi, et terminatur in consummatione seculi, in quo praecepta salutis et consilia leguntur. Interserit autem prophetias, quorum quedam iam evidenter apparent completa, quedam pendent de futuro. Inter alias dicitur, civitatem aquosam [identified with Damietta] a Christianis fore capiendam cum civitate una Egypti. Additur etiam de Alexandria captione, nec tacetur Damascus, que servos Dei multum cruciavit et cruciat. Additur preterea de duobus regibus quorum unus asseritur venturus ab Oriente, alius ab Occidente Jerosolymam in illo anno” (Oliver of Cologne, 1894, pp. 258-259). Finally, compare Jacob

To conclude this analysis of the convergence between Latin and Ethiopian eschatological motifs, we could other prophetic elements in the *Kebra Nagast*. Concerning the national epic celebration of the Solomonid dynasty, a certain “Dematyos” or “Dematewos” (seen as a deformation of “Methodius” by Pierluigi Piovanelli)⁸³ declared “that all the kingship of the world [belongs] to the king of Rome and the king of Ethiopia,”⁸⁴ thus stressing yet again the complementary function of both rulers already examined. This “intermingling” appears once again – this time set in the past, but with evident references to previous Coptic apocalypses:

And the King of Rome, and the King of Ethiopia, and the Archbishop of Alexandria⁸⁵ – now the men of Rome were orthodox – were informed that they were to destroy them [the Jews⁸⁶ who had instituted persecutions in Najran and Armenia, territories of Ethiopia

of Vitry: “Ut autem omnis ambiguitas ab hiis, qui dubitant, tolleretur, hoc presenti anno Suriani, qui nobiscum erant in exercitu, librum antiquissimum lingua sarracenicam scriptum de antiquis armariis suis nobis ostenderunt, cuius era superscripcio : Revelaciones Beati Petri Apostoli a discipulo ejus Clemente in uno volumine redacte. Quicumque autem auctor ejus libri exstiterit, ita aperte et expresse de statu ecclesie Dei a principio usque ad tempora Antichristi et finem mundi pronuncia- vit, quod ex complectione preteritorum indubitata facit fidem futurorum. Pronunciat autem inter alia de consummatione seu de consumptione perfide legis Agarenorum et qualiter imminente et quasi in januis existente destructione paganorum primo civitatem herbosam et aquis circumdatam (sic enim Damiatam appellavit populus Christianus) subjugaturus esset, post hec autem de duobus regibus novis conjungit, quorum unus venturus est a partibus occidentis, alium a partibus orientis obviam predicto regi venturum in civitatem sanctam predixit et quod per manus predictorum regum Dominus abhominabilem impiorum hominum legem exterminaturus esset, multis ex ipsis gladio interemptis, aliis ad fidem Christianorum conversis ut intraret plenitudo gentium, et sic omnis Israel salvus fiet et post hoc veniret filius perdicionis et inde judicium et finis” (*Epistula VII*, 534-55, in Jacob of Vitry, 1960, p. 152). A few lines later, Jacob of Vitry adds that the “Eastern” and the “Western kings” were soon to be identified with “king David” and emperor Frederick II (“non multo post tempore memoratas epistolas et rumores iocundos tam de rege orientali David quam de imperatore Frederico audivimus, sicut in predictis duobus libris prius audieramus,” *Epistula VII*, 557-60, in Jacob of Vitry, 1960, p. 152).

⁸³ Piovanelli, 2013, p. 14, and Piovanelli, 2014, p. 694.

⁸⁴ See Piovanelli, 2014, p. 694.

⁸⁵ The patriarch of Alexandria had already appeared in the Letter of Pisentius: see Martínez, 1990, p. 250; Derat, 2012, pp. 133-134.

⁸⁶ On the specific meaning of *Ayhud* as a religious dissident in the Ethiopian kingdom, and broadly speaking as “heretic” or “infidel”, see Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar, 2001, p. 96: The term indicated in fact “ceux qui n’admettent pas la double Alliance, et sont placés, selon une thématique anti-juive bien connue, dans une position équivalente à celles des juifs qui crucifièrent le Christ. Ceux qui ne reconnaissent pas le caractère sacré du roi d’Ethiopie sont comme ceux qui ne recon- nurent pas le Christ. [...] pour [Zar’a Ya’qob] est juif toute personne qui refuse, d’une manière ou d’une autre (au nom du respect de l’Ancien Testament, du Nouveau Testament ou des élaborations

and Rome, respectively]. And they were to rise up to fight to make war upon the enemies of God, the Jews, and to destroy them [...]. Then the kingdom of the Jews shall be made an end of and the Kingdom of Christ shall be constituted until the advent of the False Messiah. And those two kings, Justinus the King of Rome and Kaleb the King of Ethiopia, met together in Jerusalem [...] and they were to divide between them the earth from the half of Jerusalem.⁸⁷

Less than two centuries after the redaction of the *Kebra Nagast* (or at least of its final version), the prophetic motif of the “two kings” would still be alive in Ethiopia, and it would be recalled in the first half of the sixteenth century in order to strengthen the military alliance with Portugal against the Muslim neighbours of the Ethiopian kingdom. In 1508, ‘Eleni offered Manuel I military support:

That you may cause these Moors to be wiped off the face of the earth – and we by land, brother, and you by sea, for we are powerful on the land – that they may no longer give to be eaten of dogs the offerings and gifts made at the Holy Sepulchre. And now is the time arrived of the promise made by Christ and Saint Mary His mother,⁸⁸ Who said that in the last times the King of the parts of the Franks would rise up, and that he would put an end to the Moors.⁸⁹

The words of the Second *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Athanasius* resonate in this passage, as well as in Lebna Dengel’s letter to Manuel I in which the new Ethiopian ruler reiterated his proposal for a joint military campaign, justifying it as the fulfilment of the well-known “two kings” prophecy: for him,

postérieures du christianisme), cette continuité des deux Alliances incarnée par Marie et per le Roi. Il donc vain de chercher derrière le terme de ‘juif’ quelque influence réelle du judaïsme en Ethiopie”.

⁸⁷ § 117, in *Kebra Nagast*, 225-6. See Lusini, 2001, p. 52: “L’esplicita dichiarazione di un destino comune ai due sovrani, i re d’Etiopia e di Bisanzio, che si basa sulla pretesa discendenza di entrambi da Salomone e che si manifesterà compiutamente in un profetizzato incontro a Gerusalemme e nella conseguente spartizione della terra, ammantava di elementi escatologici la convergenza delle due corti nella lotta contro il sovrano ḥimyarita, [...] e insieme veicolava quell’immagine positiva degli imperatori di Roma, che per canali diversi sarebbe approdata alle ricche tradizioni medievali”. On the prophetic elements of the *Kebra Nagast*, see also Derat, 2012, pp. 135-137.

⁸⁸ Here there is probably a reference to a tradition deep-rooted in Ethiopia, especially after the reforming Church intervention of Zar’a Ya’qob, according to which Mary was to play a prominent role in the doctrinal justification of the function assigned to the king in safeguarding religious orthodoxy. On this matter, see Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar, 2001, pp. 91-97; Haile, 1992.

⁸⁹ *Discovery of Abyssinia*, 1938, p. 91, quoted in Salvatore, 2011, p. 622.

it was first prophesied by the prophet in the life and passion of St. Victor, in the book of the Holy Fathers [...] that a Frank King should meet with the King of Ethiopia, and that they should give each other peace.⁹⁰

Omitted here is the conversion of the Chalcedonian ruler, although the motif of the reconciliation of the two kings is kept, thus suggesting a new interpretation of the prophecy applied to the current political situation. Finally, an explicit connection of the prophecy quoted by ‘Eleni and Lebna Dengel to some of the Coptic apocalypses can be retraced in a passage of Francisco Álvares’s account of his stay in Ethiopia in 1520 in which the chaplain of the Portuguese mission reported the prophecy heard from the Ethiopian *bahr negus* (“king of the sea”) and the *‘abuna*:

The Abyssinians [...] had two prophecies one of St. Ficatorio, the other of St. Sinoda [an allusion to the Visions of Shenouté] who was a hermit in Egypt, saying that the Franks from the end of the earth would destroy Juda [Jedda], and Tero [Tor] and Meca [Mecca] and that so many people would hand the stones from one to another and would throw them into the Red Sea, and Meca would be left a bare plain, and that also they would take Egypt and the great city of Cairo.⁹¹

The Portuguese actually responded to Ethiopia’s request and successfully repelled the Muslim army of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, imam and general of Adal, thus saving Ethiopia from falling into his hands. At the same time, however, they were no longer willing to recognize Prester John (that is, the Ethiopian *negus*) as an eschatological figure who could complement the providential action of the “king of the Franks” prophesied in ancient apocalyptic books. In fact, the Portuguese had already discarded the eschatological implications of the prophecies that had been encouraging previous European hopes attached to the military alliance with Prester John; those hopes, however, had been kindled by the same apocalyptic traditions that conveyed the essential principles on which Ethiopian political theology had been grounded for centuries. Lebna Dengel’s plea was answered, but its prophetic overtones were not acknowledged.

Marie-Laure Derat has stated that “En dépit du fait que les apocalypses qui ont inspiré l’idéologie politique éthiopienne ont aussi contribué, à partir du XIII^e siècle, à orienter la quête du Pretre Jean du côté de l’Ethiopie, il semble bien qu’il s’agisse de deux courants concomitants d’une même tradition, courants qui

⁹⁰ Álvares, 1961, p. 60, quoted in Salvadore, 2011, p. 623.

⁹¹ Álvares, 1961, p. 60, quoted in Salvadore, 2011, p. 623.

ne se sont jamais rencontrés.”⁹² Perhaps, it could be possible to affirm that this encounter could actually have taken place on the occasion of the sixteenth-century Portuguese-Ethiopian negotiations if only the European partner had not dismissed the eschatological significance attached to the figure of Prester John and the expectations that he had aroused for more than two centuries. However, at the beginning of the early modern age, the former “Indian” monarch had been definitively stripped of his legendary and “marvellous” features and reduced to the state of a very feeble ruler. There was to be no more place for him in subsequent European prophetic conceptions.

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⁹² Derat, 2012, p. 139. See also Beylot, 2000.

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