

Relations between East and West

Various Studies: Medieval and Contemporary Ages

العلاقات بين الشرق والغرب

دراسات متنوعة: عصور وسيطة ومعاصرة

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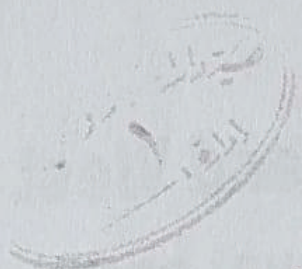
Dr. Abdallah Abdel-Ati Al-Naggar



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يتم إيداع النسخ المقررة طبقاً للقانون المشار إليه في خلال ثلاثة أشهر من تاريخ الحصول على رقم الإيداع على ألا يقل عدد الصفحات النسخة عن ٥٠ صفحة.

The Legend of Prester John versus the Peace Negotiations between the Muslims and the Crusaders in Damietta (1218-1221/ 615-618 AH)

Ahmed Mohamed Abdelkawy Sheir

Philipps-Universität Marburg.

Abstract:

There is a relationship between legends on one side, and human heritage, as well as the intellectual development of the societies' theology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and history on other side.⁽¹⁾ Therefore, it is significant to discuss and analyze the myths and legends, measuring their impact on the hostility and the détente that marked the relations between Muslims and Crusaders during the age of the Crusades. What we discover is the extent to which the Prester John legend shaped real events – in both the Latin West and the East – and played a role in forging the history of the Crusader-Muslim conflict during the Fifth Crusade over the Egyptian city Damietta.

It is important to study not only the political-military history of the Crusades, but also the history of thought and culture behind the conflict, as well as the anthropology and mythology of the times. This work thus examines the legend of Prester John, one of the most influential legends at the time of the Crusades and afterward, by focusing on the extent to which it captured the Crusader-Western imagination and how in turn it affected the peace and reconciliation negotiations between the Latin Christians of the Fifth Crusade and the Muslims. It also investigates if the legend influenced and shaped Muslim thinking. In so doing, the present paper aims to clarify the degree to which this legend was actually reflected in the collective imaginings of Latin Christians in the West and in the Levant during the Fifth Crusade, and how it contributed to shaping the real events of peace negotiations in Damietta at that time.

The Birth of Prester John's legend:

About two decades after John, Bishop of India, arrived in Rome in 1122,⁽²⁾ where he disseminated stories about the miracles of St. Thomas in India, culminating in a description

(1) Hans Schoenmakers, *The Power of Culture: A Short History of Anthropological Theory about Culture and Power* (Groningen: University of Groningen, 2012), 32,46; Nasir al-Dīn Saidon, 'Fikrat Alustūrāt Wa Kitābat Altārīkh', *Ālām Ālfkr Journal* . 40, no. 4 (2012): 253.

(2) "De Adventu Patriarchae Indorum Ad Urbem Sub Caslisto Papa Ilo (Date: Mid. 12th C.(?)", in *PJLIS* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 30–33, 34–38.



of the annual revivification of the interred body of St. Thomas.⁽³⁾ It is believed that the coming of this Indian bishop to Rome during the pontificate of Calixtus II in 1122 was the nucleus of the story of an Asian ruler called Prester John who had defeated the Muslims in the East and governed over a huge Christian Kingdom.⁽⁴⁾ Contributing to the Crusader's need for a "rescue" legend was the resistance movement against the Crusaders led by the Turkish atabeg Imad al-Din Zengy, who besieged and succeeded in taking the city of Edessa in 1144. These events created a ripe climate for a growing hope among the Christians that providence would rescue the Latin East by way of a Christian king who would emerge in the Orient to support the Crusaders in the Levant by overwhelming the Muslims from behind.⁽⁵⁾

The legend of Prester John was created under the historical pressure of real events in the Far East and the Levant. After the collapse of the Franco-Byzantine alliance in 1138, the Muslim resistance movement led by Imad al-Din Zengy managed to take control of the city of Edessa in 1144. Once Queen Melisende, the queen regent of Jerusalem, learned that the Muslims had captured Edessa, she summoned Raymond of Poitiers, Prince of Antioch (1136-1149) to find an ambassador to Rome to ask for help and a new Crusade. Thus, Hugh, Bishop of Jabala (a Syrian city) was dispatched to Pope Eugenius III (1145-1153) in Viterbo in the spring of 1145. Hugh spoke of a rich and powerful, albeit mysterious, king in the Far East who was advancing to assist the Crusaders against the Muslims.⁽⁶⁾

Otto of Freising, (1111-1158), a German bishop, was witness to the report of Hugh of Jabala to Pope Eugenius III in Rome and was the first to record Prester John's legend in the seventh book of his chronicle, "*Otto's Chronica sive Historia de duabus civitatibus*." From then on, the legend of Prester John evolved to the point that it underpinned manifold events surrounding the Crusades. It has been said that Freising wrote this work during the time of the Second Crusade, in which he recorded the story of Prester John in one major revision of the original version in or before 1157.⁽⁷⁾

(3) This event has been described in the letter the letter entitled entitled; "On the arrival of the patriarch of the Indians to the city of Rome in the time of Pope Calixtus II , see the original Latin version and his translation in; Ibid.

(4) Andrew Kurt, 'The Search for Prester John, a Projected Crusade and the Eroding Prestige of Ethiopian Kings, c.1200–c.1540', *Journal of Medieval History* 39, no. 3 (2013): 297–320; Meir Bar-lian, 'Prester John: Fiction and History', *History of European Ideas* 20, no. 1–3 (1995): 291–98; Friedrich Zarncke, 'Der Patriarch Johannes von Idien Und Der Priester Johannes', in *PJMILT*, ed. Charles F. Beckingeham and Bernard Hamilton (UK&USA: Ashgate, 1996), 23–38.

(5) Serban Papacostea, *Between the Crusades and the Mongol Empire: The Romanians in the 13th Century*, ed. Trans. From Romanian by Liviu Bleoca (Cluj-Napoca: Romanian: Cultural Foundation, 1998), 164; Adil Hilal, *Al- Ailāqāt Baīn Al-Maghūl and Āūrūpa Wa Ātharahā Ala Al- Aālam Al-Eslāmy* (Cairo: Dar 'Ein, 1997), 18.

(6) William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done beyond the Sea*, ed. trans. E. A. Bacock and A. C. Krey, vol. I (New York, 1943), 119, 142-144; Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades, Vol. 2* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 15th ed, 1995), 225, 247-248.

(7) Otto of Freising (d. 1158), *The Two Cities, the Chronicles of Universal History to the Year of 1146*, trans.



Figure 1: *The legendary Prester John*, c. 1599. Engraving, 20.3×15.7 cm (8×63/16in.), by Luca Ciamberlano after Agostino Carracci, after Karel Van Mander.⁽⁸⁾

Freising reports that Hugh of Jabala told him of a mysterious king under the name of Prester John, who was also a Nestorian preacher, ruling a kingdom beyond the Armenian and Persian lands in the Far East. He was rich and powerful enough to assist the Crusaders and to attack the Muslims, having fought against the so-called Samiardi brothers, kings of Persia, in Media in today's western Iran and stormed "Ebcactana" or "Ekbatana" the royal city of their kingdom. According to Freising, the forces of the Persian kings surrounded Prester John in a three-day battle to the death, but Prester John had forced the Persians to flee and thereafter marched towards Jerusalem to rescue the Church of the Holy Sepulcher from the Muslims. Unable to cross the Tigris River, the king ordered his men north. Knowing that the river became frozen in the winter, Prester John tried to cross the ice, but lost many of his men due to the harsh weather. Finally, Prester John was forced return to his country

Charles Christoph Mierow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), xi-xiv; Charles Christopher Mierow, 'Bishop Otto of Freising : Historian and Man', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 80 (1949): 393–402, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/283529>.

(8) Courtesy of Harvard Art Museums/ Fogg Museum, Alpheus Hyatt Purchasing Fund. S1.44.2. Photo: Imaging Department, Harvard College. See: *Keagan Brewer (Trans.), Prester John: the Legend and its sources*, London: Ashgate, 2015.



with what remained of his army.⁽⁹⁾

Karl Helleiner writes that Hugh of Jabalah used the story of Prester John to plead for military assistance against the Muslims who controlled Edessa in 1144, and that this anecdote should be understood in the context of the Islamic-Christian conflict. The message, therefore, proposes a legendary strategy for surrounding the Muslims armies from the West and the East by way of a Christian military alliance between this person called Prester John and the western Crusaders.⁽¹⁰⁾

On the other hand, there is no doubt that this legend was a reflection of real historical events occurring in central and eastern Asia at this time. That may explain its appearance in Otto's report, and its contribution to European and Levantine imaginings. The first historical occurrence was the fall of Edessa in 1144 into the hands of Imad al-Din Zingy, which made the Levant a fertile environment for spreading tales, legends, and superstitions about a heroic figure who could rescue them.

The second real event is recorded by Ibn al-Āthir and Ibn-al-Jauzī, who wrote that Sultan Sanjar, ruler of Khorasan and Ghazni (died 1157), had been defeated by Yelu Dashi of the Qara Khitai State at the ferocious Battle of Qatwan in 1141-42 /536 AH, which took place in central Asia. The battle was so tremendous that Ibn-al-Jauzī and Ibn al-Āthir later wrote, "In the history of Islam, there was no battle greater than this (Qatwan)." It was especially important for Muslims because it was a crushing defeat for their forces under the leadership of Sanjar, whose army apparently lost some 100,000 fighters, including 4,000 women (!).⁽¹¹⁾

This highlights the defeat of Sanjar and his brother Masoud in 1141 and the collapse of the Kharizmain who were defeated by Yelu Dashi the next year, in 1142.⁽¹²⁾ Reports of Yelu Dashi became conflated with the figure of Prester John so that it was believed that Prester John was the leader who defeated the Muslim Seljuk Sultan Sanjar in 1142, and would, therefore, come to defeat the other Seljuk leader, Imad al-Din Zingy in Edessa in 1144. Nevertheless, Yelu Dashi was not a Nestorian, but in fact Buddhist, and the official religion of his state was Buddhism. A Chinese source relays, "On the day of Kai wu in the second month of 1121, Yelu Dashi slaughtered a black bull and white horse to the earth, heaven, and his predecessors and prepared himself launching to the East." This confirms that Yelu

(9) Ottonis Episcopi Frisingensis Chronica, 'Historia De Duabus Civitatibus', in *Monumentis Germaniae Historicis*, lib. VII, XXXIII, ed. Adolf Hofmeister (Hanover: Lipsiae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1912), 363-67; Otto of Freising, *The Two Cities*, 443-44.

(10) Karl F. Helleiner, 'Prester John's Letter: A Mediaeval Utopia', *Phoenix*, 13, no. 2 (1959): 51-52.

(11) 'Izz ad-Din (d.1233/630 AH) Ibn-al-Athīr, *Kitāb Al-Kāmil Fi Al-Tārīkh*, vol. 9, ed. Mohamed Yusuf, 4th ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmyah, 2003), 319; Abū-al-Farāj Abd-al-Rahman Ibn-al-Jauzī (d.1116/510AH), *Al-Muntazam Fi Tārīkh Al-Umam Wa Al-Mulūk*, Vol. 18, ed. Mohamed 'Ata and Mustafa 'Ata (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmyah, 1992), 17, 19.

(12) Hilal, *Al-Ailāqāt Baīn AlMaghūl and Āūrūpa*, 19; Slessarev, *Prester John: The Letter and the Legend* (Minnesota, 1959), 28.



Dashi was never a Christian; nevertheless, Christianity did make inroads in his lands at the hands of the Nestorians missionaries.⁽¹³⁾

In addition, the association between Prester John, as an Indian ruler, and the Muslims went back to the year of 392 AH / 1001 AD. When Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (971-1030 AD), who was of Turkish-Persian origin, invaded India and captured the Indian ruler “Gibal”, who committed suicide by self-immolation, after which Islamic rule over India continued for eight centuries up to 1857 AD/ 1274 AH.⁽¹⁴⁾ This old conflict between India and the Muslims contributed to growing the hopes and imaginations of the Western-Crusading world about what was called Prester John and his victories over the Muslims in the Far East. An imaginary visualization of victory over the Muslims in India and Persia in the person of the awaited savior Priest, Prester John, fulfilled an important psychological function for Christian Europeans

The legend and the peace negotiations during the Fifth Crusade

Latin Christians in the West and the East employed myths and legends during the Crusades to recruit support for their conflict with Islam and Muslims.⁽¹⁵⁾ In Germany, religious rumors, stories, and legends spread to invoke the need for a Fifth Crusade. In 1217, rumors circulated that signs had appeared in the skies over the provinces of Cologne and Friesland in the shape of crosses; these appeared in three places: one appeared towards the north and was white in color, another, also white, pointing southwards and the third was a crucifix in the middle of a dark color. These signs were promoted as favorable portents for the launch of another crusade.⁽¹⁶⁾

King Andrew II of Hungary took up the cross and led the first wave of the Fifth Crusade to the Levant in 1217. However, King Andrew II returned to Hungary at the beginning of 1218 without having achieved little towards motivating the Western world against the Muslims.⁽¹⁷⁾

(13) Hilal, *Al-'Ailāqāt Baīn Al-Maghūl Wa Āūrūpa*, 19-21; Hafez Hamdi, *Aldaūlat Alkhaūārizmīat Wa AlMaghū* (Cairo, 1949), 51.

(14) Ibn-al-Athīr, *Kītāb Al-Kāmil Fi Al-Tārīkh*, Vol. 8, 20; Ahmad al-Jawarneh, *Alhind Fi Dhil Alsādah Aleslāmīah* (Yarmouk, Saudi Arabia: Hamada li Alnashr, 2006), 14, 30-31.

(15) Christopher Eric Taylor, “Waiting For Prester John: The Legend, the Fifth Crusade, and Medieval Christian Holy War.” (master’s thesis, University of Texas at Austin, May 21011), 3.

(16) Roger of Wendover (d.1236), *Flowers of History*, Vol.II., trans. J.A. Giles (London: Henry G. Born, 1849),388-89; Oliver of Paderborn, ‘Historia Damiatina (date late 1220s)’, in *PJLIS* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 135-36; Oliver of Paderborn, ‘The Capture of Damietta’, in *CSC* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 48-49.

(17) Oliver of Paderborn, ‘The Capture of Damietta’, 56-57; Thomas C. Van-Cleve, ‘The Crusade of Frederick II’, in *The History of the Crusades*, Vol. II, ed. K.M.Setton. (Madison, Milwaukee, and London: University of Wisconsin, 1969), 393-94; Mahmud Saeed Omran, *Al-Ḥmlah Al-Ṣalībīah Al-Khāmisah 1218-21/615-18 AH* (Alexandria, Egypt: Dār al-M ‘aārif, 1985),176.



The Fifth Crusade against Egypt, 1217-1221, led to a revival of Prester John legend once again by Jacques de Vitry, the Bishop of Acre, who was involved in the Crusades in the early thirteenth century. De Vitry was the first one to believe in, and refer to, the Prester John legend in 1217. He wrote letters in 1217 to various ecclesiastics in Europe claiming that many Christian kings who lived in the East in regions next to the land of Prester John, had heard of the advent of the Crusaders, “*crucesignatorum*,” and were about to come to help them against Muslims “*Sarracenis*.”⁽¹⁸⁾

Whether de Vitry had heard this story from some Nestorian bishops or he and his followers produced it, it is clear that de Vitry’s aim was to whip up the enthusiasm of the European and Crusader forces towards taking on the Muslims in Egypt. The psychological role that this legend played in the Fifth Crusade is thus apparent. The importance of “Prester John’s reinforcements” is also clear when de Vitry claimed that the Christians who lived among Muslim “Saracens” outnumbered the Muslims, and if the Crusaders could gather “4,000 men”, they would not find any army strong enough to counter them. He also referred to the discord between Muslims.⁽¹⁹⁾ The appearance of these letters at the beginning of the Fifth Crusade contributed toward driving the enthusiasm for crusading warfare.

In 1219, Oliver of Paderborn, a German historian who participated in the Fifth Crusade and was one of its most important chroniclers, wrote that the Crusaders received a letter written in Arabic, whose author was neither a Jew, a Christian nor a Muslim. This anonymous letter prophesied the fall of Damietta. This letter predicted that a certain Christian king of the Nubians was underway to destroy the holy Muslim city of Mecca and to exhume the bones of the Prophet Muhammad, who is described by Oliver of Paderborn as «*the false prophet*.” Such actions would, he thought, lead to the glorification of e Christianity.⁽²⁰⁾

Although this letter might have been intended as a form of propaganda to reinforce the crusading effort against Damietta, the news of the above-mentioned letter as well as the siege of Damietta itself circulated throughout the Christian world. In addition, it led the Georgians to send a letter to the Crusaders’ camp in Damietta expressing shame that they

(18) Jacques de Vitry, *Lettres (1160/1170-1240)*, ed. R.B.C.Huygens (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1960), 95-98; Jacques de Vitry, ‘Letter II, March 1217’, in *PJLIS* (London: Ashgate, 2015); 98-99; I. de Rachewiltzy, ‘Search of Prester John: Europe’s Early Vision of Asia’, in *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1971), 37-38.

(19) Jacques de Vitry, ‘Letter II, March 1217,’ 98-99; Jacques de Vitry, *Lettres*, 95-98; Reinhold Röhrich, ed., *Regesta Regni Hierosolymitani (MXCVII –MCCXCI)* (Oeniponti: Libraria Academica Wageriana, 1893), 280-28:no.894.

(20) Oliver of Paderborn, ‘The Capture of Damietta’ 89-91; Oliver of Paderborn, ‘Historia Damiatina,’ 135-139; Dominic Francis, ‘Oliver of Paderborn and His Siege Engine at Damietta’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 37 (1993): 28-32.



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were not joining the Crusade to Egypt.⁽²¹⁾ Accordingly, the Crusader leaders had a strong conviction that they would exterminate the Muslims and felt little need to hold peace talks with them.⁽²²⁾

Prester John was a motivational factor for the Crusaders in Damietta, especially whenever some disaster struck, such as the storm that wrecked the Crusader camp in 1218.⁽²³⁾ Crusaders, like de Vitry, used this legend to help overcome the difficulties they faced. On the other hand, the conspiracy of Ibn-al Mashtūb,⁽²⁴⁾ and a number of the princes to depose al-Kamil, led to the spread of chaos in the Muslim camp on the eastern side of Nile River. Thus in February, 1219 AD/Zulqida 615 AH, the Crusaders were able to march to the eastern side and take control of the Muslim camp.⁽²⁵⁾ This further increased the Crusaders' hope in the coming of Prester John, especially when they thought that the Muslims were frightened of his powers.

The news spread quickly among the Christians of the medieval world of the time about the presence of a Christian sovereign in the Far East, King Prester John/King David, who governed a number of people and had enormous wealth.⁽²⁶⁾ The Crusaders were hugely confident with this notion and were sure of the coming assistance from the Orient in the person of Prester John or, according to some texts, King David, who was determined to serve the Christian world and release it from the oppression of Islam.⁽²⁷⁾

Oliver of Paderborn maintained that King David, who was the son of Prester John or perhaps his nephew, fought with three armies against the Muslims. It was believed that the forces of King David would join the army of Emperor Frederick II, who had sent the Duke of Bavaria with the bishop of Passau, Count Guy of Brienne, the Marquis of Baden and others nobles, to Damietta in May 1221 to support the Crusaders.⁽²⁸⁾ These forces, together with the Crusader army in Damietta, would be sufficient to exterminate the Ayyubids in

(21) - Oliver of Paderborn, 'The Capture of Damietta,' 91.

(22) Serban Papacostea, *Between the Crusades and the Mongol Empire*, 164.

(23) Oliver of Paderborn, 'The Capture of Damietta' in *CSC*, 66-67; Roger of Wendover, *Flowers of History*, vol. II, 413; Omran, *Al-Ḥmlah Al-Ṣalībīah al-Khāmisah*, 217.

(24) 'Imad al-Dīn ibn al-Mashtūb was a Kurdish prince who rebelled against al-Kāmil sayin; "This (al-Kāmil) is a silly boy, and there is no benevolence comes from him." Abu Bakr Ibn Aybak al-Dwādāry (d. 1335/ 736 AH), *Kinz Al-Durar Wa Jāmi'u Alghurar*, Vol.7, ed. Saeed Ashour (Cairo: Dār Eaḥiā al-kutub, 1972), 198-200.

(25) Gamal al-Din Mohamed Ibn-Wāṣil (d. 1298/ 697 AH), *Mufarrij Al-Kurūb Fi Akhbār Banī Āyyūb*, Vol.4, ed. Jamal al-Din al-Shaiyal (Cairo, 1960), 16-17; Taqī al-Dīn Ahmed Ibn-Ali al-Maqrīzī (d.1441/845), *Kitāb al-Sulūk Li-M'arifa Duwal Al-Mulūk*, Vol.1, ed. Muhammad Abd al-Qadir Ata (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'lmyah, 1997), 314; al-Dīādāry, *Kinz al-Durar*, Vol.7, 198-200.

(26) Oliver of Paderborn, 'The Capture of Damietta,' 90. note.2, 112, 113, note.4.

(27) Papacostea, *Between the Crusades and the Mongol Empire*, 164.

(28) Oliver of Paderborn, 'The Capture of Damietta,' 90-note.2, 112, 113-note.4; Paul Pelliot, 'Deux Passages de La Prophétie de Hannan, Fils d'Isaac', in *PJMTLT* (UK&USA: Variorum& Ashgate, 1996), 113.



Egypt.⁽²⁹⁾ Hence, the possibility of making peace with the Muslims was dismissed, as long as they believed in their powers and the fictional army of Prester John. However, this belief would drive them to a disaster in the end, as will soon be made clear.

Although the Crusaders in Damietta showed hostility to the Muslims, the people of Damietta were not equally set on war, avoided giving offense and sought some form of peace agreement. Expecting a long siege, the residents of Damietta stored wheat, flour and any other supplies they might need during this Crusader investment. Additionally, they sent their messengers to inform al-Kāmil about their cruel situation.⁽³⁰⁾

However, the propaganda concerning the imminent arrival of the legendary king, Prester John or his son David and their fictional army, contributed psychologically to the obstruction of any peace negotiations. In fact, it fed the Crusader's enthusiasm for warfare – or as they saw it, certain victory. There was, they felt, no need to make peace with the Muslims. Such feelings became stronger when the news of the above-mentioned letters, as well as the fall of Damietta, circulated in the Christian world. Thus, as long as the Crusaders believed in Prester John, the possibility of making peace with the Muslims was ignored.

The Legend of Prester John versus al-Kāmil's Peace Offers:

Once the Crusaders arrived on the coast of Egypt at Damietta, Sultan al-Kāmil of Egypt sent his men to beg the Muslim world to rescue Egypt and wrote to his brothers in the Levant seeking their help against the Crusaders.⁽³¹⁾ However, al-Kāmil was also inclined to hold peace talks with the Crusaders, believing that reconciliation would be better than war and that the objective of any warring parties was to establish a permanent peace.⁽³²⁾

In March 1219 AD/ Zulhijja 615 AH, al-Kāmil sent a peace offer to the Crusaders in which he offered to hand over to them the cities of Jerusalem; Tibnīn, Tiberius as well as the other areas that had been taken by Salah al-Dīn, except for the castles of Karak and Montreal “*Shoubak*.” In return, the Crusaders would raise their siege on Damietta and leave Egypt.⁽³³⁾ The King of Jerusalem, John of Brienne, preferred to accept this offer, but Pelagius, who was the papal legate, as well as the Knights Hospitallers, and Knights Templar, refused to

(29) Oliver of Paderborn, ‘The Capture of Damietta’ 90-note.2, 112, 113-note.4; Sawīrus Ibn al-Muqaffā, *Tārīkh Misr Min: Tārīkh Al-Baṭārikah Li-Sawīrus Ibn Al-Muqaffā*, Vol 3.2., ed. Abd-al-Aziz Jamāl al-Dīn (Cairo: Maitabat Madbūly, 2006), 1530.

(30) Omran, *Al-Hmlah Al-Ṣalībīah Al-Khāmisah*, 193.

(31) Badr al-Dīn al-‘Ainī (d. 1451/855 AH), *‘Iqd Al-Jumān Fi Tārīkh Āhl Al-Zamān*, Vol.4, ed. Mahmud Rizq, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub wa al-Wathāiq al-Qaūmīah, 2010), 57; al-Dwādāry, *Kinz Al-Durar*, Vol.7, 190-191.

(32) Omran, *Al-Hmlah Al-Ṣalībīah Al-Khāmisah*, 36-37; Mohammed M. Zeadh, *Hamlit Loius XI ‘ala Misr* (Cairo: Lajnat al-Tālīf wa Tarjama, 1961), 49.

(33) Abū al-Faraj Gregorius Ibn al-‘Ibrī (d. 1286/ 660 AH), *Tārīkh Mokhtaṣr Al-Diwwal*, ed. Antoine Salhani, 2nd ed. (Lebanon: Dar al-Raaed, 1994), 413; Oliver of Paderborn, ‘The Capture of Damietta,’ 84-86, 89-90; Ahmed Sheir, *Tibnīn (Toron) in the Age of the Crusade AD 1105-1266 / AH 498- 664* (Germany: GRIN, 2015), 95-96.



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hold peace negotiations with the Muslims.⁽³⁴⁾ It looked, according to the above-mentioned letters of Prester John, that the Crusaders wanted to capture the whole of Egypt and the Muslim world with Prester John's awaited assistance.

Al-Mu'azzam—Isa, al-Kamīl's brother and ruler of Damascus, marched to join his brother al-Kamil in Egypt and to defend it against the Crusaders' invasion. On his way to Egypt, he destroyed several Muslim castles and cities, as he wanted to leave them in an untenable condition for the Crusaders in case they accepted al-Kāmil's above-mentioned peace offer.⁽³⁵⁾ He also calculated that even if the Frankish forces did occupy these cities, he would be able to regain them because they would be vulnerable without defenses.⁽³⁶⁾

Interestingly, Oliver of Paderborn thus perceived an association between the above-described precautions of al-Mu'azzam and the potential coming of Prester John. He mentions that al-Mu'azzam (called "Cordin" by Oliver) came with the princes of Hamah and Homs to help Egypt. Oliver maintained that the Ayyubids were influenced by the power of King David, the son of Prester John, who had achieved great victories over the Persians and Khwarismains. The power of King David was threatening Baghdad, the capital of the Caliphate. Thus, according to Oliver, al-Mu'azzam was afraid to advance far from his land, though he did finally march to Egypt.⁽³⁷⁾

The extent to which the collective mind of the Crusaders in Damietta connected between Prester John and the legend of King David, was connected to their refusal to consider the peace-building overtures of the Muslims soon became obvious. The Crusaders believed that the Muslims were suing for peace in order to avoid the overwhelming extermination they would face once the forces of Prester John or his son David reached Damietta. In addition, the legend helped the Crusaders to manage and overcome any internal conflicts in their own ranks.

That this legend had an influence on the Muslim-Crusader peace negotiations was obvious on the beaches of Damietta. In August 1219 AD/ Jumada al-Thani 616 AH, the Crusader-Western forces in Damietta refused a new peace offer from al-Kāmil, who sent two Crusader prisoners, Andrew of Nanteuil and John of Arcis, to renew his former peace offer and hold

(34) Ibn-al-Athīr, *Kitāb Al-Kāmil*, Vol. 10, 379; Penny J. Cole, *The Preaching of the Crusades to the Holy Land, 1095-1270* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Medieval Academy of America, 1991), 143-44; Pelliot, 'La Prophétie de Hannan, Fils d'Isaac,' 113; Joseph Donovan, *Pelagius and the Fifth Crusade* (USA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950), 62-63.

(35) Thomas C. Van-Cleve, 'The Fifth Crusade', in *Setton, Vol. II*. (Madison, Milwaukee, and London: University of Wisconsin, 1969), 410; Runciman, *A History of the Crusades, Vol. 3*, 156.

(36) Ahmed Ibn Ali al-Harīrī (d.1519/926 AH), *Al-I'alām Wa Al-Tibūn Fi Khorūd Al- Firingj Al-Malā'aīn 'Ala Dīār Al-Muslmīn*, ed. Suhail Dhakar (Damascus, 1981), 91; Shīhab al-Dīn Abū-Shāmah (d.1266/665AH), *Dhīl Al-Raūdatīn*, ed. Mohammed Zahid Ibn-al-Hassan, 2nd ed. (Beirut-Lebenon: Dar al-Jīal, 1974), 155; Sheir, *Tibnīn (Toron) in the Age of the Crusade*, 96.

(37) Oliver of Paderborn, 'Historia Damiatina,' 136, 139; Paderborn, 'The Capture of Damietta,' 123-124, 130.



a truce.⁽³⁸⁾ Al-Kāmil offered to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and other castles. He also promised that he would send twenty Muslim nobles as hostages until delivery of the above-mentioned places to the Crusaders had taken place.⁽³⁹⁾ However, the Crusaders rejected all attempts to negotiate a peace with the Ayyubids, and the Muslims had to resort to war to liberate Damietta.⁽⁴⁰⁾

It was interesting that the second peace offer of al-Kāmil came after a great triumph of the Muslim forces over the Crusaders in Fāriskūr; a small village near Damietta, on August 29th, 1219/ 16th Jumada al-Thani 616 AH. In this battle, the Muslims pretended to withdraw, but resumed their attack against the Crusaders at night, inflicting heavy losses.⁽⁴¹⁾ However, the peace offer made thereafter represented a sincere intention on the part of the Muslims to end the conflict, and it also reflected the extent to which this legend influenced the conflict and the peace-building process.

Notwithstanding the Crusaders' rejection of a peace treaty, the Sultan of Egypt renewed his peace offer for the third time. He offered to hold a truce for thirty years and pay five thousand Bezant/dinars to the Crusaders in exchange for the castles of Karak and Shoubak. He also promised to pay all expenses to rebuild the castles and cities that had been destroyed by his brother al-Mu'azzam.⁽⁴²⁾ Omran written that it was unreasonable for the Crusaders to refuse all these offers. On the other hand, it is possible that al-Kamil's generous concessions were mere political trickery, or a ploy by which to gain time, and regroup Muslims forces.⁽⁴³⁾

(38) Vitry, *Lettres De Jacques de Vitry (1160/1170-1240)*, 150; Omran, *Al-Ḥmlah Al-Ṣalībīah Al-Khāmisah*, 264; Donovan, *Pelagius and the Fifth Crusade*, 62; Rachewiltzy, 'Search of Prester John,' 39.

(39) Van-Cleve, 'The Fifth Crusade,' 415; 69.

(40) Ibn-al-Athīr, *Kītāb Al-Kāmil*, vol. 10, 379; Guy Perry, *John of Brienne: King of Jerusalem, Emperor of Constantinople, c.1175-1237* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 198-200.

(41) Paderborn, 'The Capture of Damietta,' 114; Omran, *Al-Ḥmlah Al-Ṣalībīah Al-Khāmisah*, 260-261.

(42) Eracles, 'Estorie d'Eracles, Empereur et de Conquest de La Terre d'outreMer', in *R.H.C.H. Occ., Tome II* (Paris, 1859), 342-43; Omran, *Al-Ḥmlah Al-Ṣalībīah Al-Khāmisah*, 264; Perry, *John of Brienne*, 198-200.

(43) Omran, *Al-Ḥmlah Al-Ṣalībīah Al-Khāmisah*, 265.



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Figure 2: Attacking the city of Damietta during the Fifth Crusade from the boats on the river; Matthaei Paris Chronica Maiora II, Saint Albans, England, ca. 1240–53. Folio 59V, MS 16II, Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.⁽⁴⁴⁾

During the long siege of Damietta, the people who had suffered indescribably and faced certain starvation,⁽⁴⁵⁾ were hoping al-Kāmil would make peace with the Crusaders. The situation became worse with the death of al-Kāmil's brother, al-Fā'iz, who was responsible for bringing assistance from the East, with increasing the Mongol danger, and with the conflict between al-Kamil and his brother in Aleppo. All these exigencies forced al-Kamil to make one last attempt at peacemaking a few days before the fall of Damietta in November 1219. The Crusaders, as before, refused to consider peace.⁽⁴⁶⁾

As described, the Prester John legend had driven the Crusaders to reject peace. This was obvious in Jacques de Vitry's Letter VII, dated 18th April 1221, when he said that the Sultan of Egypt, al-Kāmil, had heard about the marvels of King David, Prester John's son. Accordingly, the Sultan of Egypt contacted certain Latin nobles who were captives in Cairo, "John of Arques-la-bataille, odo of Chatillon, Andrew of Carignon" and certain Knights Templar, Knights Hospitallers and Teutonic Knights, through whom he aimed to build peace with the Crusaders ("us"). Moreover, Jacques de Vitry mentions that al-Kāmil sent letters with his own messengers to the Crusaders' camp with the aim of forming a

(44) Helen Nicholson and David Nicolle, *God's Warriors: Crusaders, Saracens and the Battle for Jerusalem* (UK: Osprey, 2005), 190.

(45) Röhricht, *Regesta*, 246:n0.924; Jacques de Vitry, *Lettres*, 112-22; Omran, *Al-Ḥmlah Al-Ṣalībīah al-Khāmisah*, 270 .

(46) Roger of Wendover, *Flowers of History*, Vol. II, 421-422; Ibn-Wāṣil, *Mufarrij Al-Kurūb Fi Akhbār Banī Āyyūb*, Vol.4, 23; Omran, *Al-Ḥmlah Al-Ṣalībīah al-Khāmisah*, 270 .



peace agreement or at least a truce. The Crusaders, however, refused the offer, particularly, when the Crusaders received the above-mentioned news and rumors regarding King David or Prester John. They also received a letter confirming that Emperor Fredrick II was about to march in August with substantial supplies to help the Crusaders in Damietta.⁽⁴⁷⁾

It has been mentioned that de Vitry and the Crusaders obtained the above-mentioned letter about King David, through their Arab spies in Outremer, where Prince Bohemond IV obtained it from spice merchants in Antioch.⁽⁴⁸⁾ De Vitry and others did consider this legendary letter as trustworthy and as a legitimated fact. Translated by De Vitry into Latin, the letter Christianized the Mongols. Additionally, there were some real historical events added to this letter, like the certain Latin nobles who were sent by al-Kāmil to present his request of peace, in order to be consistent with their imaginary historical events.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Jacques de Vitry's letter of 1221 stated that the Christians would vanquish the city of Damietta, which would then be subject to the control of two new kings; one for the West, Fredrick II, and the other from the East, Prester John. These kings would exterminate some Muslims, and others would convert to the "faith of Christ." De Vitry wrote that the Crusaders announced the previously mentioned news and letter to the Christian people who "were gathered on the Word of God", i.e. who had joined the Crusade. However, they waited for a long time without hearing any pleasant news or letters from either the Emperor Fredrick II or King David, the eastern king.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Al-Kāmil was himself facing several internal troubles because of the conspiracy of Ibn-al-Mashtūb, which led him to leave the Muslim camp. This left it open to the Crusaders, who captured it in February 1219/ Zulqida 615 AH.⁽⁵¹⁾ In addition, news had arrived that the Mongols led by Genghis Khan had invaded the eastern Muslim lands, news which terrified the Muslims in Egypt and Syria. By contrast, the same news revived the crusading spirit. In Genghis Khan (1206-1226 AD/ 603-623 AH) the Crusaders imagined they had found a divine ally, and awaited the successor of Prester John.⁽⁵²⁾

The extent to which the Levant and the West believed in this legend is obvious from the outcome in Damietta. It led the Crusaders' rejection of peace with the Ayyubids of Egypt.

(47) Jacques de Vitry, *Lettres*, 134-53; Röhrich, *Regesta Regni*, 250: no. 941; Jacques de Vitry, 'Epistola VII, Date 18th April 1221', in *PJLIS* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 128, 132.

(48) Christopher Eric Taylor, 'Waiting for Prester John: The Legend, the Fifth Crusade, and Medieval Christian Holy War' (master's thesis, the University of Texas at Austin, 2011), 1, 8-9.

(49) Jacques de Vitry, 'Epistola VII, Date 18th April 1221,' 128, 132; Taylor, "Waiting For Prester John," 8-9

(50) Jacques de Vitry, 'Epistola VII, Date 18th April 1221,' 128-29, 133-34; Jacques de Vitry, *Lettres*, 134-53; Röhrich, *Regesta Regni*, 250: no. 941.

(51) Ibn-Wāṣil, *Mufarrij Al-Kurūb Fi Akhbār Banī Āyyūb*, Vol. 4.16-17; Omran, *Al-Hmlah Al-Ṣalībīah Al-Khāmisah*, 234-35.

(52) Omran, *Al-Hmlah Al-Ṣalībīah Al-Khāmisah*, 236; Hassan Ibrahim Hassan, *Entishār Al-Eslām Bān Al-Māghūl Wa Al-Tatār* (Cairo, 1933), 28.



Subsequently, many rumors about Prester John and his son, King David, spread throughout the Christian world, and were used as a psychological weapon to discourage any attempts to make peace with the Muslims. No less than three other versions of the letters associated with King David, son of Prester John, were used in these propaganda wars, letters asserting that King David or Prester John were awaited in Damietta. They depicted David, his army, and his kingdom as the divine superpower, which would crush the Persians and the Muslims in the East, and eventually the Muslims of Egypt also.

These three versions of the letter associated with King David were Latin translations from what was thought to be original Arabic, written by a Christian in Baghdad in 1220 or early 1221, with some elements added to the Latin translation. The letters recorded the victories of King David, son or grandson of Prester John – in reality Genghis Khan. Jacques de Vitry in Egypt received a copy of the letter and its second version, which was widely circulated in 1220-1221. The letter described the initial movements of the Mongols and included the names of many places and cities that were subject to the authority of “King David.”⁽⁵³⁾

Moreover, the letter wrongly mentioned that King David defeated the sultan Soniar, referring to the Sultan Sanjār of Khorasan and Ghazni, who was defeated in the above-mentioned battle of Qatwan in 1141-42 AD /536 AH by Yelu Dashi the leader of Kara Khitai State.⁽⁵⁴⁾ This mistake was perpetuated for more than fifty years, between 1141-42 and 1220-1221, which shows that the sender and author of the letter had a historical knowledge of the story of Prester John which was first began in Europe with the Bishop of Jabala in Rome in 1145 and further recorded by Otto of Freising.⁽⁵⁵⁾ The author of the letter wanted to restore the old hopes and boost the Crusaders’ ambitions in Egypt.

Eric Taylor argues that this shows “the ideological stamina of Christianity by subtly incorporating Islam’s influence into the construction of John’s realm and ruling practices.”⁽⁵⁶⁾ The Crusaders and the Western world imagined Prester John, or his son King David, to be the protector of the Christian world; the present letter declared that he had insulted the Muslims’ Caliph and would deliver Baghdad. The messenger said, “*Our king... wants to have Baghdad so that the seat of our Patriarch might be there.*”⁽⁵⁷⁾

This letter also referred to the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, which had been demolished by al-Mu’azzam, as mentioned above. Once again, it depicts this King as a

(53) Relatio de Davide, ‘(Prima Carta, 1220/early 1221)’, in *PJLIS* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 107-113; Relatio de Davide, ‘(Secunda Carta of 1220/1221)’, in *PJLIS* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 114–17; Relatio de Davide, W. and R., *Epistola (Tertia Carta 1220/1221)* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 118-122.

(54) Ibn-al-Athīr, *Kitāb Al-Kāmil*, Vol. 9, 319; Ibn-al-Jauzī, *al-Muntaẓam Fi al-Tārīkh al-Umamm*, Vol. 18, 17, 19.

(55) Otto of Freising, *The Two Cities*, 443-444.

(56) Christopher Eric Taylor, ‘Waiting for Prester John,’ 26.

(57) Relatio de Davide, ‘(Prima Carta),’ 105-106, 112-113.



Nestorian Christian, who freed the Christian captives sent by al-Kāmil of Egypt, “Sultan of Babylon”⁽⁵⁸⁾ as a gift to the Caliph of the Muslims in Baghdad.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Hence, a historical, albeit willful, misconception occurs conflating King David with Genghis Khan, the former who was said to have sent a letter to the Abbasid Caliph al-Nasser “Alnazer” in 1221, demanding his homage and so forth. However, the historical resources mention nothing regarding any letter that might have been sent by Genghis Khan to Bagdad at this time, 1221 AD/617-618 AH.

Indeed, in 1217 AD/614 AH, the Abbasid Caliph al-Nasser in Baghdad requested the assistance of Genghis Khan against the Sultan Mohamed Ibn Khawarizm, who was about to attack Baghdad because of his disagreement with the Abbasid Caliph. The latter thus sent his messengers to the Mongol leader to enlist him as an ally against the Khwarizmi Sultan.⁽⁶⁰⁾ There were many other points of convergence such as this between acts that the letter attributed to King David but which in reality were linked to Ghengis Khan.

Ibn al-‘Ibrī mentions that the Tatars under the leadership of Genghis Khan conquered the lands beyond the river, which in the letter is called the “*Alaanar*” in 1219/ 616 AH with about 200,000 soldiers. He subsequently captured the lands of the Khwarizmi state, described under the name “*Chavarsmisan*” in David’s letter, as well as Samarkand, and other cities up to the borders of Iraq, Baghdad and the Muslim Caliphate.⁽⁶¹⁾ It did not record that Genghis Khan (King David) sent a letter to Baghdad or even brought it under his authority.

In 1219, 617 AH, Ibn al-Āthīr also wrote that people came from China to the lands of Turkistan, including Kashgar and Blasagun. They then headed to lands beyond the River, including Samarkand and Bukhara, among others. Some of these Tatars marched on Khorasan and devastated it, after which they continued to conquer the cities from Khorasan up to the border of Iraq. Later, a group of them marched to Ghazni, India, Sajestan, Kerman and other cities and countries, committing atrocities and crimes.⁽⁶²⁾ This clearly illustrates that the writer of the King David/Prester John letter and the Crusaders added imaginative and dramatic materials to the legend by attributing the exploits of the actual historical Genghis Khan to the non-existent Prester John and his son David.

The letter states that the son of Prester John forced the Muslims to rebuild the walls of

(58) who was known to the latinas in the crusader states as Meledin, with variants thereon. In medieval usage, Babylon of signified to Cairo, *Relatio de Davide*, ‘(Prima Carta),’ 113, note:21.

(59) Ibid.

(60) Ibn-al-Athīr, *Kītāb Al-Kāmil*, Vol.10, 371-373; Fouād Saīād, *AlMaghūl Fi Altārīkh*, vol.1 (Beirut: Dar alnahdhah, 1980), 71-74.

(61) Ibn al-‘Ibrī, *Tārīkh Mokhtaṣr Al-Diwwal*, 407-411, Abd El Salam Fahmy, *Tārīkh Aldawlah Almaghwliāh Fi Eīrān* (Cario: Dar Almā‘arif, 1981), 57-70.

(62) Ibn-al-Athīr, *Kītāb Al-Kāmil*, Vol. 10, 399-401.



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Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by al-Mu'azzam.⁽⁶³⁾ However, the city of Jerusalem remained in Muslims' hands until 1229 when Emperor Fredrick II took control of the city on February 18th, 1229/ 638, through the Agreement of Jaffa signed with al-Kāmil of Egypt.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Because al-Mu'azzam had destroyed the walls of Jerusalem, it remained without defense until the Crusaders rebuilt the city's walls in 1239, which in turn led to the repeal of the agreement of 1229 between the Muslims and the Crusaders.⁽⁶⁵⁾

Returning to Damietta, we find one individual on the Crusader side interested in peacemaking – St. Francis of Assisi, who had abandoned military life and become a preacher. St. Francis thought that he could convert the Muslims and their Sultan al-Kāmil to Catholicism and that this could serve as the foundation for a peace without bloodshed. St. Francis got Pelagius' approval and visited the Muslims' camp and the Sultan al-Kāmil, who listened to Francis and his offer of peace through conversion. St. Francis believed that peace could not hold without the conversion of the Muslims. He was an ardent Christian who sought to convert all people to a belief in Christ. His overtures to al-Kamil could thus be seen as another form of the crusading mission to regain Jerusalem for Christianity.⁽⁶⁶⁾

Meanwhile, the Crusaders continued to refuse any peace agreement with al-Kāmil of Egypt, who contacted the Crusaders for this purpose in 1221 AD/ 618 AH; as mentioned, al-Kāmil had offered to hand over to the Crusaders the cities of Jerusalem, Tiberius, Sidon, Jabala, and Latakia, as well as all of the places that had been taken by Salah al-Din. The Crusaders, however, refused a peace settlement and demanded three hundred thousand dinars (al-Maqrīzy says that they asked for 500 thousand), in compensation for the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem.⁽⁶⁷⁾

Disputes broke out between King John of Brienne of Jerusalem (1210-1225), who favored accepting the peace offer of the Muslims, and the papal legate, Pelagius, over the leadership of the Crusaders in Damietta. In March 1220, King John of Brienne and his forces returned from Damietta to defend Acre and Crusader possessions in Syria against al-Mu'azzam,⁽⁶⁸⁾

(63) Sheir, *Tibnān (Toron) in the Age of the Crusade*, 96; Van-Cleve, 'The Fifth Crusade,' 410 ; Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, Vol. 3, 156.

(64) al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb Al-Sulūk*, Vol.1, 353-54; Sheir, *Tibnān (Toron) in the Age of the Crusade*, 97.

(65) Ibid, 100-101; Peter Jackson, 'The Crusades of 1239-41 and Their Aftermath', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 50, no. 1 (University of London:1987), 42; Saeed Ashour, *Al-Ḥarakah Al-Ṣalībīyah*, Vol. 2 (Cairo, 1963), 987-89.

(66) Adam L Hoose, 'Francis of Assisi's Way of Peace? His Conversion and Mission to Egypt', *The Catholic Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (2010): 449–69; Jessalynn Lea Bird, 'Crusade and Conversion after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215): Oliver of Paderborn's and James of Vitry's Missions to Muslims Reconsidered', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 21, no. 1 (2004): 30; Rosalind B Brooke, 'The Franciscan Concept of Mission in the High Middle Ages by E. Randolph Daniel', *Speculum* 52, no. 3 (1977): 643–44.

(67) al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb Al-Sulūk*, Vol.1, 327; Ibn al-Muqaffa, *Tārīkh Al-Baṭārikah*, Vol 3.2, 1538; Omran, *Al-Hmlah Al-Ṣalībīyah Al-Khāmīyah*, 323.

(68) Oliver of Paderborn, 'The Capture of Damietta,' 101-102; Pelliot, 'La Prophétie de Hannan, Fils d'Isaac,'



who had returned to Damascus to mobilize Islamic forces to fight the Crusaders in Egypt, as well as launch attacks against their possessions in Syria to distract the Crusaders' attention from Egypt. In 1221, John of Brienne returned to Damietta with numerous stories about the victories of King David, "who they say is the son of Prester John."⁽⁶⁹⁾ This news underlay their intention to continue fighting the Muslims and caused them to dismiss all peace-making attempts.

This is a quotation from Brienne' story of Prester John "My counsel shall stand, and all my will shall be done; there is no one who can resist my countenance (...). I have found David, son of Prester John, my servant; with my holy oil, I have anointed him king of the Indies (...). I have given victory over the king of the Persians; I have placed a great part of Asia under his feet. The King of the Persians, being lifted up unto excessive pride, wished to be the monarch of Asia; against him, King David, who they say is the son of Prester John, won the first fruits of victory. Then he subjugated other kings and kingdoms to himself, and, as we learned by a report that reached far and wide, there is no power on earth that can resist him."⁽⁷⁰⁾

Pope Honorius III received a letter from Plagues, the papal delegate, in March in 1221,⁽⁷¹⁾ recounting the glories of King David and triumphs against the Muslim "infidels." The Pope used the aforementioned peace-building proposal to promote Prester John's legend, stating that the news of Prester John caused the Muslims to be frightened and that this was the reason they were suing for peace.⁽⁷²⁾ Influenced by the report of Plagues, Honorius accepted the news about "Prester John" and "King David" that was circulating, though actually based on the victories of Genghis Khan.⁽⁷³⁾ The Pope in turn spread this report of the good news from the East among Western political figures including the Archbishop of Trier, to whom he wrote:

"The lord has clearly begun to judge his cause, mindful of the injuries suffered by his people every day, and of the reproaches of those who call upon him. Actually, as our Venerable brother Pelagius, Legate of the Apostolic See, has informed us in his letter, King David, who is ordinarily called Prester John, a catholic and God-fearing man, has entered Persia with powerful forces, has defeated the Sultan of Persia on the battlefield, has invaded and

113; Donovan, *Pelagius and the Fifth Crusade*, 70-71; Omran, *Al-Hmlah Al-Şalībīah Al-Khāmisah*, 298.

(69) Oliver of Paderborn, 'The Capture of Damietta,' 112-113

(70) Ibid.

(71) It was said that this letter was among the Chaldean letters discovered by Pelagius in "the temple of the Saracens" and then translated by Pelagius, who sent it to the Pope. See: Alberic de Trois-Fontaines, 'Chronica (1232-1241)', in *PJLIS* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 146-147.

(72) 'Pope Honorius III, Letter Date 12th March 1221', in *PJLIS* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 124; R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge & Massachusetts: Harvard University press, 1962), 45-46.

(73) Oliver of Paderborn, 'The Capture of Damietta,' 124 . n.7.



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occupied 24 days' march of his land. He holds therein many fortified cities and castles. His army is not even ten days' march from Baghdad, the greatest and most famous city, and special seat of the Caliph, whom the Saracens call their chief priest and pontiff. ⁽⁷⁴⁾

Thus the papacy's dreams of supremacy over the East – including Christians and Muslims – appeared to be on the verge of fulfillment. In other words, it could be said that the Prester John legend of the Fifth Crusade seemed to be a kind of attempt at a convergence of the till then divergent Eastern and Western Christian powers, who could now be allied against the Muslims. In addition, the Pope hoped to use this legend to bolster the supremacy of the Papacy over secular authority in the West.

The letter shows the attitude of the Pope towards the Muslims' peace proposals on the one hand, and the legendary savior, Prester John on the other; it is clear evidence of the hold the Prester John legend had over the collective consciousness of the Christians and their leaders in the West and the Levant. The pope believed that the Muslims must be frightened of Prester John's powers:

“The fear of these events has caused the Sultan of Aleppo, brother of the Sultans of Damascus and Egypt, to prepare his army to attack the Christian forces at Damietta and to march against the above-mentioned king. (...). Whence we hope in the Lord that, if our army at Damietta receives the help in this summer, it will easily occupy the land of Egypt, while the forces of the Saracens, which had been gathered from all directions to defend it, have been dispersed to defend the parts of their land. Owing to this reason, we command your brotherhood through these papal writings that urge the Crusaders in the region of Trier to fulfill their vows to come to assist the above-mentioned army. ⁽⁷⁵⁾

However, the passage above makes clear the Pope's lack of knowledge about the political and religious situation in the East. In another passage, the pope says that the Georgians were “*Catholic men,*” who would launch a war against the Muslims; but in fact, the Georgians were Orthodox and owed allegiance to the Seljūks of Asia Minor. In addition, the Georgians were geographically distant from the Muslims of Egypt and Syria, there were no joint borders between them nor did they have a powerful army. ⁽⁷⁶⁾

Bernard Hamilton writes that the letter Pope Honorius III received from Plagues with its prophecy was originally written in Arabic and was an updated rewrite of “the work of the ninth century Persian Nestorian scholar, Hunan Ibn Ishak.” He also thought it possible that the Copts of Egypt wrote the letter. ⁽⁷⁷⁾ Christian Tyerman, on the other hand, believed that

(74) ‘Pope Honorius III, Letter’ 123-124; F. Zarncke, ‘Zur Sage von Prester Johannes’, *Neues Archiv* II (1887), 612-13; Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*, 45-46.

(75) ‘Pope Honorius III, Letter,’ 123-124; Zarncke, ‘Zur Sage von Prester Johannes,’ 612-13; Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*, 45-46.

(76) Hilal, *Al-‘Ailāqāt Baīn Al-Maghūl wa Āūrūpa*, 25; Rachewiltzy, ‘Search of Prester John,’ 39.

(77) Bernard Hamilton, ‘Continental Drift: Prester John's Progress through the Indies’, in *Prester John, the*



this prophecy was a byproduct of an Egyptian Nestorian interpretation from around 1220.⁽⁷⁸⁾

It is quite unreasonable to believe that the Nestorians played a any role in spreading and feeding the legend of Prester John because the Nestorians did not have any interest in engendering the Crusades or in promoting this prophecy. On the contrary, they hoped for peace because the seat of the Nestorian Patriarch in Asia was in Baghdad. Furthermore, the dhimmis, Eastern Christians or Copts, were well integrated into the Islamic state and were respected by Muslims as “people of the book”. The Crusaders on the other hand, regarded the Eastern Christians and Copts as heretics.⁽⁷⁹⁾

Hilal maintains that the Crusaders themselves circulated the prophecies and rumors surrounding Prester John, and that the legends and myths about a Christian King coming from the Far East to recapture Jerusalem were an expression of the Western Christian’s deep-seated hostility towards the Muslims and the Arabs. But the Prester John legend also represented a continuously dynamic effort to unify the Crusaders forces to restore Jerusalem and to encroach on Muslim lands. Such efforts were particularly renewed after every unsuccessful confrontation with the Muslims, such as in 1144 after the fall of Edessa, during the Second Crusade or during the Fifth Crusade.⁽⁸⁰⁾ Adding fuel to the fire, the Pope relayed in another letter that King David had begun marching on Baghdad with around “400,000 men, including 132,000 Christian Knights,” and that the capture of the city was imminent.⁽⁸¹⁾

These letters and the spread of rumors by Pope Honorius, Plagues, Jacques De Vitry and others formed and reflected the imaginings of the crusading culture of the Latin West and East. After a long waiting period, in which peace agreements with Muslims were refused, Prester John did not come! The Crusaders marched towards Cairo in July 1221 and the Egyptian forces repulsed them. This interval of time in which the crusaders waited for Prester John, proved pivotal and enabled the Muslims to regroup while the seasons changed from dry to monsoon. Equally it the Nile time to burgeon and overflow in the summer, contrary to the rivers in Europe, and preventing the Crusaders from crossing itsouthward to Cairo.⁽⁸²⁾ The Muslims were thus able to besiege the crusader forces between the two water sources of the Nile.⁽⁸³⁾

All told, the legend of Prester John and its impact on decisions for war or peace in the Fifth Crusade was an anomaly. However, it is also indicative of the Crusaders essential

Mongols, and the Ten Lost Tribes, ed. C.F. Buckingham and B. Hamilton (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 243.

(78) Christopher Tyerman, *God’s War: A New History of the Crusades* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 642

(79) Hilal, *Al- Ailāqāt Baīn Al-Maghūl wa Āūrūpa*, 25-26.

(80) Ibid, 25-26.

(81) Zarncke, ‘Zur Sage von Prester Johannes,’ 613-614; Southern, *Western Views of Islam*, 46.

(82) Ibn al-Muqaffa, *Tārīkh al-Baṭārikah*, vol.3.2, 1538; Brewer, *Prester John*, 97.

(83) Brewer, *Prester John*, 97.



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determination – one might even say irrational desire – for supremacy over the Muslims. Prester John, “merely provided a vessel through which a long-held Christian desire might materialize.”⁽⁸⁴⁾

After several more clashes between the two sides in Damietta, the Crusaders eventually did come to make a peace agreement.⁽⁸⁵⁾ At this point, Al-Āshrāf, al-Kāmil’s brother, was not inclined to be reconciled and wanted to wipe out the Crusaders. Nevertheless, the Sultan al-Kāmil said that this was not right nor was it in the interests (“Maṣlaḥah,”) of Muslims. The Sultan was concerned that the Crusaders were the Latin Christian senior knights, still in control of the city of Damietta at the time. The right decision, he argued, was to make peace with the Crusaders, who were in such a weakened state by then that they would accept any terms offered from the Muslim side.⁽⁸⁶⁾ The Crusaders signed a peace agreement and a truce with the Muslims and left Egypt on the September 7th, 1221/ 7th Rajab 618. All prisoners held by the Crusaders and Muslims were released according to the terms of this long-awaited peace.⁽⁸⁷⁾

It is not an overstatement to say that the Crusaders lost the Fifth Crusade, not on the beaches of Damietta or the Nile River but behind the Tigris River. Furthermore, the destruction of the Khwarizmi state, the battles of Persia, and the incalculable psychological effect this had upon the Crusaders certainly changed the course of the Fifth Crusade – while also helping the Ayyubids foster their power in Egypt.⁽⁸⁸⁾ In other words, while the Legend of Prester John and the overthrow of Khwarizmi rule, gave new hope and enthusiasm to the Crusaders, it also allowed the Ayyubids to concentrate on uniting their forces and overcoming their differences so as to more successfully face the Crusaders.

Steven Runciman has argued that the papal legate, Pelagius, was an arrogant man who caused the failure of the Fifth Crusade by refusing the peace terms offered by the Sultan of Egypt. However, his strategy might not seem quite as intransigent, i.e. refusing to take back the city of Jerusalem without holding the castles of Montreal castle and Karak, when we consider that the Muslims in Egypt and Syria were in alliance and governed by the same sultan.⁽⁸⁹⁾

At all stages of its development and evolution, the Prester John’s legend was an attempt to merge fiction and fact so as to induce greater numbers of Christian soldiers and knights

(84) Taylor, ‘Waiting for Prester John,’ 49.

(85) Ibn-al-Athīr, *Kitāb Al-Kāmil*, Vol. 10, 380; Ibn al-Muqaffa, *Tārīkh Al-Baṭārikah*, Vol 3.2, 1539; Al-‘Ainī, *Iqd Al-Jumān*, Vol.4,57.

(86) al-al-Dwādāry, *Kinz Al-Durar*, Vol.7, 211.

(87) Ibn-al-Athīr, *Kitāb Al-Kāmil*, Vol. 10, 380; al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb Al-Sulūk*, Vol.1, 329.

(88) Donovan, *Pelagius and the Fifth Crusade*, 73-74.

(89) Donovan, *Pelagius and the Fifth Crusade*, 74.



to fight the Muslims in Egypt in defense of Christianity and its “honor”.⁽⁹⁰⁾ The mystery of Prester John’s legend left its imprint particularly on the Fifth Crusade.

European writers and European society were aware of the existence of the Tartars and the Mongols, but had consciously or unconsciously imagined the forces of Prester John and his son David in their place. In Alberic’s chronicle it is recorded that when King David, the son of Prester John, and his army heard about the delivery of Damietta to the Muslims, they returned to their fatherlands. Alberic writes that the Hungarians and Cumans called the army of King David the “Tartars” at the time of the chronicle of Alberic, 1232-12141.⁽⁹¹⁾

In conclusion, although the legend of Prester John was used to oppose peace with the Muslims, the failure of the miraculous rescue by Prester John eventually forced the Crusaders in Damietta to seek peace without any of the advantages they might have originally had. They only asked the Egyptians to allow them to travel far away from the water, which besieged them everywhere. The legend thus while serving the Crusader cause in the beginning by helping to rally Crusader morale, in the end led to defeat and disappointment. While belief in Prester John and his imminent arrival was an effective psychological weapon against Muslims, it also provided a delay that gave the Muslims a chance to overcome their difficulties and to regroup their forces.

In principle, the Muslims were willing to sue for peace because their internal affairs were tenuous at the beginning of the Fifth Crusade. There was a rebellion led by Ibn-al Mashtūb, which was subdued with al-Mu’azzam’s assistance.⁽⁹²⁾ The Muslims also feared an alliance between the advancing Mongols in the East and the Crusaders. However, the Crusaders misinterpreted the Muslims’ actions as a fear of Prester John. While the Muslims feared a genuine foe, the Crusaders had converted that foe and his victories into an imaginary Crusader legend.

In the beginning, Muslims sued for a peace that would have disadvantaged them and stripped them of much of what they had gained since 1187. It would have been reasonable to expect the Crusaders to jump at this spectacular offer, which gave them Jerusalem. However, the Crusaders refused the offer twice, relying instead on exaggerating the legend and lore of Prester John. This in turn changed the historical narrative of both the Christian West and the Muslim East. If anything, the impact of the myth of Prester John on the course of history demonstrates how myth can also become truth.

(90) Donovan, *Pelagius and the Fifth Crusade*, 74.

(91) Alberic de Trois-Fontaines, ‘Chronica (1232-1241),’ 146, 147.

(92) Ibn-Wāsil, *Mufarrij Al-Kurūb Fi Akhbār Banī Āyyūb*, Vol.4, 16-17.



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Abbreviations:-

PJLIS: Prester John: The Legend and Its Sources, trans. Keagan Brewer

Setton: The History of the Crusades, ed. Setton.

CSC: Christian Society and the Crusades, 1198-1229, trans. J.J. Gavigan, Sources in Translation, ed. E. Peters

PJMRTL: Prester John: The Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes, ed. Bernard Beckingham, Charles and Hamilton.

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