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The Middle Indies: Damião de Góis on Prester John and the Ethiopians

Jeremy Lawrance

On 28 February 1514 (1513 OS), a twelve-year-old page at the court of Manuel I of Portugal witnessed the arrival of a most remarkable embassy from the shores of India:

adpulit in Lusitaniam anno salutis humanae MDXIII legatus a magno illo Indorum imperatore Presbytero Ioanne eiusque matre regina Helena ad christianissimum Lusitaniae regem Emmanuelem missus, cui nomen Matthaeo, natione Armenicus. Is legationis suae comitem habebat adolescentulum quempiam nobilem patria Abessinum in aula imperatoris Presbyteri Ioannis æducatum, cui nomen erat Iacobo.¹

The young page was Damião de Góis (1502–74), a gentleman from Alenquer who became one of the foremost chroniclers and men of letters of his native Portugal; my quotation comes from an epistle containing an account of the embassy, together with Latin translations of the documents in the case, which he wrote to the archbishop-elect of Uppsala, Johannes Månsson (Johannes Magnus Gothus), nearly twenty years later (1 December 1531).

Two decades later still, in his Crónica de D. Manuel (begun 1556, published 1567), Góis would again recall, this time in circumstantial detail, King Manuel’s reception of Prester John’s ambassadors Matêwos (or Matt’ëos) and Ya’qob: their lodging in the house of the almoxarife dos scravos Gonçalo Lopes, their arrival at the royal residence in Santos o Velho escorted by the bishop of Guarda, the Count of Vilanova and ‘outros muitos fidalgos e suas valias’, the king’s gracious gesture in rising to his feet and descending from the throne to greet them, the presentation of their letter of credence ‘scripta em língoa arábia e persiana’, and their subsequent audience with the queen, the infantes and the bishop of

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¹ Legatio magni Indorum imperatoris Presbyteri Ioannis ad Emanuelem Lusitaniae regem anno Domini 1513 ([Antwerp]: Ioan. Grapheus, 1532), henceforth Legatio, fol. ii°. For full bibliographical details see Francisco Leite de Faria’s superb Estudos Bibliográficos sobre Damião de Góis e a sua Época (Lisbon: Secretaria de Estado da Cultura, 1977), item §1. I am most grateful to Maria Isabel Pestana de Mello Moser for her kindness in showing me her photocopy of the Legatio, and also for allowing me to consult a draft of her forthcoming edition and study.

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Safi (Morocco). Only after three days of pomp was Matèwos invited to deliver his message.

The exotic 'Indian' visitors, as the Portuguese were perfectly well aware, were in reality ambassadors from the African kingdom of Ethiopia, despite the fact that their circuitous five-year voyage to Portugal had taken in the Portuguese-held cities on the Malabar coast of southern India. Matèwos's mission was to deliver a letter from the queen regent Eleni on behalf of her step-grandson King Dàwit II (baptismal name Lebna Dengel 'incense of the Virgin', thronal name Wànan Sagàd 'revered by lions', regn. 1508-40), together with five gold medals inscribed with Ethiopic characters and a reliquary containing a fragment of the True Cross which the king received on his knees with tears of joy. The letter contained a call for Portuguese naval aid against the Muslims of the Red Sea, in return for military aid against Egypt. Matèwos also hinted at the readiness of the Monophysite Ethiopian church to accept the Roman obedience.

King Manuel, however, was less interested in the matter of Matèwos's embassy than in the opportunity to question the envoys about a figure who had fascinated the imaginations of medieval Europeans since the twelfth century. For the curious fact about all this scene, as the first quotation makes clear, is that the Portuguese court appears to have been happy to accept that the Ethiopian negus in question was none other than the legendary Prester John of the Indies, despite the fact that the ambassadors used the name David (Dàwit). A striking example of this mental 'superimposition', as I shall call it, is Góis's disingenuous footnote to the first mention of the great Prester John, emperor of the Indians: 'Hic rex siue imperator proprio quidem nomine tunc uocitabatur Dauid' (Legatio, ii).

Manuel detained the legates for more than a year. His chief purpose in doing so was soon made obvious (Legatio, iii):

rex diebus paucis post iubet eosdem ad se accersi, et coram doctis ali-quot, astante procerum corona, per interpretem rogari de eorum fide, ceremoniis et Indici regni statu.


3 Legatio iv-v; ix', art. 50. For the historical background see Armando Cortesão and Henry Thomas (eds.), Carta das Novas que vieram a El-Rey Nosso Senhor do Descobrimento do Preste João (Lisboa, 1521) (Lisbon, 1938), 15–48; and Jean Aubin, 'L'ambassade du Prêtre Jean à D. Manuel', Mare Luso-Indicum [Paris, Centre de Hautes Etudes Islamiques et Orientales d'Histoire Comparée], 5 (1976), ix–xiii and 1–56. Sergew Hable-Selassie, 'The Ge'ez letters of Queen Eleni and Libne Dingil to John, King of Portugal', in IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi Etiopici: Roma, 10-15 aprile 1972 (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1974), 1, 547–66, gives texts of great though unverified interest to show that the appeal for European aid in return for submission to Rome, which had formed a central element of Ethiopian foreign policy since at least the fourteenth century, was now made more urgent by a Messianic prophecy about the approach of the eighth millennium and Doomsday in 1500 (552–5).
The eager interrogation was natural enough; even if one is King of Portugal it is not every day that one entertains the envoy of a prince who is said to be suzerain over seventy-two kingdoms, whose subjects include Amazons, Pygmies, Cynocephali and other monstrous races, and whose palace is furnished with a bed of sapphire 'to prevent lust', and a dining-room table made of solid emerald 'to prevent drunkenness' and capable of seating 50,000 guests at one meal. Such, at any rate, was the account furnished in the celebrated Epistola Presbyteri Ioannis (c. 1155–65) which was the basis of the medieval legend. Copied, translated and printed in a dizzying variety of recensions down to the sixteenth century, the Epistola represented the most brilliant and durable of the marvels of the East.

The presence of Manuel's scholars and nobles, however, signalled that the purpose of the interview was not idle curiosity. It marked the official importance of what might indeed have been considered, by any educated Christian European in the Middle Ages, as one of the most significant diplomatic encounters of the age: between the European king whose boast it was to have spread the crusade further across the globe than any in recorded history, and the mysterious Oriental emperor who, for more than three centuries, had been hoped for as the ally of Christendom in a final and clinching encirclement of Islam which would herald the recapture of Jerusalem and usher in the Last Age before the final triumphant return of the Messiah. The legend of Prester John had this practical side, and the search for him had been conducted for centuries. The Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century gave the idea of an encircling alliance to destroy Islam a new plausibility, and also opened up the East to Western travellers; hence Marco Polo thought he had found Prester John when he came across the Nestorian Wang Khan of the Kereit. But it was soon conceded that the fabulous king could not be a Tartar; Odoric of Pordenone in the 1320s was the 'last actual European traveller to locate Prester John in Asia', though Mandeville naturally invented a satisfactory encounter (Phillips, 153). By that time, however, Prester John's relocation from far Asia to the Upper Nile and Ethiopia was already well under

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The Middle Indies

way, probably as a result of an Ethiopian embassy to Pope Clement V in 1306 from Wedem Ar’ad (1297–1312), who was instantly identified as the Oriental Christian potentate of the spurious Epistola Presbyteri Ioannis.6 The identification of a kingdom located ‘in tribus Indiis’ (Zarncke, §12) with Ethiopia did not necessarily imply any geographical misconception, since India had been a peculiarly vague notion for centuries: roughly speaking, ‘Lesser or Nearer India’ seems traditionally to have referred to North India, ‘Further or Greater India’ to the Malabar coast and Coromandel, and ‘Middle India’ to Ethiopia, with the Nile as the dividing line between India and Africa.

The embassy of 1306 was only the first of a series of such approaches by the Ethiopians, culminating in a delegation to the ecumenical Council of Florence in 1441 which aroused the renewed geographical interests of the Italian humanists. Poggio Bracciolini’s report on Ethiopia in his India recognita (1448), based partly on information from the Ethiopian delegates, was taken over by Enea Silvio Piccolomini (Pius II) in his Historia rerum ubique gestarum, where the references to Prester John would later be lovingly annotated by Christopher Columbus. The combination of medieval legend, crusading fervour and Italian scientific speculation which had thus accumulated about the figure of Prester John made it inevitable that his ‘discovery’ should figure high on the agenda for the Portuguese navigators. Góis attributed the first moves to Prince Henry the Navigator (Crônica do Príncipe D. João, chs. VI–VIII), but it was King João II who converted the search for Prester John, ‘which had evidently become something of an obsession with him’, into a major aim of policy, sending Pêro da Covilhã by land from Cairo and Bartolomeu Dias by sea round the Cape to search for an access to the legendary kingdom ‘on the far side of the Nile’ which divided Africa from Middle India.7 Valentim Fernandes, in the cosmographical introduction to his grand Portuguese translation of Marco Polo, Poggio’s India recognita and other geographical texts (Lisbon, 1502), declared confidently to the dedicatee, João’s successor Manuel I, that Prester John could not be the Nestorian khan whom Marco Polo had found in Cathay, and that he must therefore be the Jacobite king of Ethiopia.8 The search continued

6 Phillips, Medieval Expansion of Europe, 151-4; Ullendorff and Beckingham, Hebrew Letters of Prester John, 8–9. After the embassy an account of Ethiopia was composed by the cartographer Giovanni da Carignano in his Mappamondo, and this passed to the Jewish-Genoese cartographers of Mallorca, the last of whom, Yehuda Cresques (as the convert Jaume Ribes), would work for Prince Henry the Navigator.


8 On Fernandes’s famous edition see F. J. Norton, A Descriptive Catalogue of Printing in Spain and Portugal 1500–1520 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 504–5, item F33. Fernandes’s claim was, of course, standard; Antonio Usodimare made it in 1455 (‘The emperor and
unabated, now with the aim of breaking the Venetian monopoly of the Levant spice trade.

In this light we begin to understand the excitement which greeted the arrival of the Ethiopian legation in 1514, and why it was that, as the Crónica de D. Manuel informs us, this state audience (to which Góis gave the name consistório) included not only 'os prelados do regno que então andavão na corte', but also the 'doctores em theologia'. Their brief was to verify the identification with Prester John by framing precise 'perguntas acerqua das cousas da fé e religião que os christãos do Abexi têm e usam', and we are informed that, as Matêwos responded, 'António Carneiro secretario del-rei screvia' (Crónica de D. Manuel, III, 222). The main body of the Legatio consists of Dâwit II’s letter and Carneiro’s text of Matêwos’s replies to 112 articula on the rites and beliefs of the Ethiopian church, the office of the abuna or patriarch, and the kingdom, status and court of Prester John which the Portuguese experts put to him in the consistório. These ‘articles’ are an admirably concise series of responses, of a single sentence and often less than a line in length – Carneiro was an excellent secretary; most are direct minutes of what the ambassador said (or what his interlocutors believed him to have said), as shown by the use of the first person singular and plural. The original Portuguese questions – more interesting for my purpose – are not preserved, but can usually be deduced (some articles posit the preceding question directly by such words as Ad haec ingenue fateri).

The letter in which Góis thus related the Ethiopian legation arose as the result of a conversation about the Portuguese voyages of discovery with a Swedish bishop in the Prussian city of Danzig in 1531. By the complex evolutions of which our story is full, Carneiro’s minutes of the consistório had by chance fallen into Góis’s hands years previously in Antwerp, where he had been posted in 1523 as secretary to the Portuguese feitoría (Legatio, iii) and where one of his jobs seems to have been to collect for the Infante D. Fernando, brother of King João III, all the historical material he could muster in any language for a revision of the general chronicle of Hispania. Carneiro’s articles were given to him by Rui Fernandes de Almada, former feitor in Safi in Morocco (1491–5), who in turn had obtained them while on an embassy to Emperor Maximilian and Duke Albert of Austria.9 These facts are adduced not merely

Christian patriarch of Nubia and Ethiopia Prester John is called abet selib or “hundred men” ['abd es-salib actually means ‘servant of the cross'], and these countries are all that is left to Prester John since the Great Khan of Cathay gave battle to him in the plain of Tenduch', quoted by Ch. de la Roncière, La Découverte de l’Afrique au moyen âge, Cairo, 1925, II, 122.

9 For Góis’s historical research at Antwerp see Damião de Góis, Crónica do Príncipe D. João, ed. Graça Almeida Rodrigues (Lisbon: Universidade Nova, 1977), lxxii n. 124. Aubin finds independent evidence that a copy of Dâwit II’s letter was sent to the feitor Silvestre Nunes in Antwerp in March 1515/14 (‘L’ambassade du Prêtre Jean’, 9 n. 50; see Crónica de D. Manuel, iii, 222); but it is needless to question Góis’s account on the grounds Almada was not in Germany in 1515 (ibid. 48 n. 231) since the MS of the articles clearly cannot have reached Góis before 1523.
to suggest the widespread European receptivity to any shred of information about Prester John, but also to evoke the heady atmosphere of rumour and counter-rumour in a world in which, despite the lack of modern transport and telecommunications, news seems to have circulated far and wide with astonishing rapidity. The *Legatio* was subsequently published, without the author's consent, by Góis's Protestant friends Cornelis and Jan Grapheus (Schrijver?); within a year of its publication an English translation by Sir Thomas More's son John had appeared in London (Faria, §2), More having obtained a copy from an unidentified 'speyall familyar frende of mine' of whom we can nevertheless be tolerably sure that he was present at a consistory of Emperor Charles V and Pope Clement VII in Bologna in January 1533 of which I shall speak below, mentioned in More's introductory epistle. The Latin text of the *Legatio* was further reprinted in Antwerp in 1544 (Faria, §11) and 1552 (Faria, §17).

However, by the time these later editions appeared they were, at least as far as their author was concerned, quite out of date. For in the interval between 1514 and 1527 Dâwit II's envoys had returned to Ethiopia with the first Portuguese embassy to that kingdom under Lopo Soares de Alvarøenga; and a second, successful Portuguese embassy under Rodrigo de Lima, after numerous adventures, had in turn come back to Lisbon. Góis was still unaware of the latter fact when he wrote to Månsson in 1531, but in 1533 he was summoned back to Portugal by Manuel's successor King João III. It was here that he met Francisco Álvares, the chaplain of the embassy, and his companion the Ethiopian priest Šagã za-Ab, 'homem mui docto na lingoa calde [i.e. Ge'ez] e arábia e mui exper- to nas cousas da sagrada scriptura'. Góis befriended 'Zagazabo', as he called him, and soon showed him his texts of the 1514 embassy and Matëwos's articles (*Crónica de D. Manuel*, III, 225):

> e elle me dixe que alguns diferiam da verdade, mas que nem por isso se devia dar culpa a Mattheus, por ser homem secular e pouco experto nas cousas de theologia e nas cerimônicas da religião christã dos Abexis, por ser estrangeiro armênio de naçào; mas que, visto ho desejo que eu tinha de saber ha verdade destas cousas, me prometia de compor hum tratado de tudo ho que a este negocio convinha, e mo dar pera ho poer na lingoa latina.

Šagã za-Ab immediately began the promised *tratado* refuting Matëwos's errors, a task which he completed in April 1534 despite having lost all his books on the voyage from Ethiopia. By this time, however, Góis was off

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10 Góis had learnt from Jorge Lobo de Andrade, another contact in the Antwerp India House who had spent time in Goa and Cochin, of Lopo Soares de Alvarøenga's abortive embassy in 1517 described in the *Carta das Novas* printed by Galharde in Lisbon in 1521 (*Legatio* xiv†; Aubin, 'L'ambassade du Père Jean', 51 n. 152, and Cortesão and Thomas, *Carta das Novas, passim*): but he still knew nothing of the subsequent one under Rodrigo de Lima in 1520-6.
once again on his travels, via Antwerp to Padua, where he was to spend four or five years studying humanist letters, and then in 1538 to Louvain, where he married and settled as a student.

In the meanwhile Álvares had been dispatched by João III to the papal consistory in Bologna of 1533 which I mentioned on the previous page, with the mission of presenting Dâwit II’s formal submission to the communion of Rome. Clement VII rejected the overture on dogmatic grounds, but the occasion caused a sensation, and was commemorated by the much reprinted and translated *Legatio Dauid Aethiopiæae regis ad Clementem VII* (Bologna: Giacobo Keymolen Alostese, 1533), a work in which the humanist Bishop of Nocera, Paolo Giovio (1483–1522), an expert on oriental matters who had published a *Comentario de le cose de’ Turchi* at Rome the previous year, had a large hand.¹¹

Europe was now agog with expectation and curiosity; it seemed as if one of the great geographical mysteries was on the verge of being unveiled. The story takes on, indeed, the aspect of some modern race to publish a scientific paper. It soon became known in the papal *curia* that Álvares, who died in Rome soon after arriving in Italy, had kept a detailed journal of his voyage to Ethiopia, ‘itinerum suorum atque actionum omnium diurnos commentarios’ as Giovio put it in his introduction to *Legatio Dauid Aethiopiæae regis*. Giovio boasted that he had obtained a commission from D. Martinho de Portugal to translate into Latin Álvares’s ‘five-volume treatise *De Abyssiniiis Aethiopibus* on the geography of the region and the source of the Nile, its flora and fauna, its people and their customs, its emperor and his government, and its religion’.¹² Independently, in Antwerp Francis Titelmans, O.F.M., published as an appendix to Amandus Zierixeensis’s *Chronica* (1534) his *De fide et moribus Aethiopum christianorum*, an account based on information provided by our old friend Rui Fernandes de Almada. Not long afterwards, another humanist ecclesiastic who had met Álvares at the consistory in Bologna, Lodovico Becadelli, obtained an Italian translation of his journal (Vatican Library MS Ottob. Lat. 1104); Becadelli

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¹² This turned out to be an optimistic description of Álvares’s journal, and Giovio never wrote the translation. The short epilogue to *Legatio Dauid Aethiopiæae regis* entitled ‘De regno Aethiopiæae ac populo deque moribus eiusdem populi’, recently edited in José V. de Pina Martins, *Humanismo e Erasmismo na Cultura Portuguesa do Século XVI: Estudo e Textos* (Paris: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1973), 273–5, has been traditionally attributed to Góis ever since Andreas Schott printed it in his *Hispaniae illustratae, seu rerum urbiqumque Hispaniae Lusitaniæ Aethiopiae et Indiæae scriptores uarii* (Frankfurt, 1603), 11, 1285–8, but Giovio (who was certainly the translator of four out of five of the letters in the *Legatio Dauid Aethiopiæae regis*) is a more plausible candidate. As Beckingham notes, the text is ‘decidedly fanciful’, closer to the spurious medieval *Epistola Presbytren Joannis* than anything Álvares [or, by the same token, Góis] might have written (‘Francisco Álvarez and his book on Ethiopia’, in *Middle East Studies and Libraries: A Felicitation Volume for Prof. J. D. Pearson*, ed. B. Bloomfield, London: Mansell, 1980, 1–12, pp. 9–10, rpt. in his *Between Islam and Christendom*). The clinching point is its use of the Italian form *Preto fannes*. 
began to prepare his own more polished version, which he completed in 1542. Meanwhile, a copy of Álvares's papers in their original language was evidently still available in Portugal, since they were hastily published in 1540 by the royal printer Luís Rodrigues as *Verdadera informaçam das terras do Preste Joam*.

Amidst this flurry of publications, Góis issued his *Fides religio moresque Aethiopum sub imperio Preciosi Ioannis degentium* (Louvain: R. Rescius, 1540; Faria, §7). The rumour of Giovio's plan to issue Álvares's text had reached Góis by September 1539, when he wrote to his friend the Paduan humanist Lazzaro Buonamico to enquire about its progress; professional rivalry now led him to launch into print on his own account. *Fides religio moresque Aethiopum* was a two-part work, the first Góis's history of the Portuguese search for Prester John from Prince Henry the Navigator up to the 1527 legation, and the second a direct translation of Šaga za-Ab's treatise, which had reached Góis in Padua between 1534 and 1538.

Among Šaga za-Ab's promised rectifications of Matewos's original articles there are clear indications that the Ethiopians had by this time, if not considerably before, realized the political advantages of turning the Prester John legend against the credulous Europeans to their own diplomatic ends. The most striking evidence is Šaga za-Ab's attempt to fudge the problem of whether or not the Monophysite Ethiopians were heretics by denying that the Council of Chalcedon had reached any decision (*Fides religio moresque Aethiopum*, 268); and his discussion of the etymology of Prester John's name, 'which should be *Pretiosus Ioannis Ethiopiae* not *Presbyter Ioannes Abyssiniae* or *Indiae*, since this agnomen is written in our language *Ioannes belul*, that is precious or high, or in Chaldee *Iannes Encoe'*. *Fides religio moresque Aethiopum* also

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13 Various drafts of Beccadelli's recension are represented in Vatican Library MSS Ottob. Lat. 2202, 2789, and Parma, Biblioteca Palatina MS 977 A and B (the relationship between these four witnesses is sketched out in Beckingham, 'Francisco Álvarez and his book on Ethiopia', 2, 8–9); it appears to be the source of the Italian version printed by Ramusio in 1550 (see below).


15 The book was reprinted in Paris in 1541 (Faria §8) and Lyon in 1561 (Faria §21), and in the collected works which Góis himself prepared for the press, *Aliquot opuscula* (Louvain: Rescius, 1544; Faria §10); he also included a Portuguese résumé in his *Crónica de D. Manuel* (III, 223–36). My references are to the edition in Pina Martins, *Humanismo e Erasmismo na Cultura Portuguesa do Século XVI*, 221–73, although this text, like Dias de Carvalho's translation in Damião de Góis, *Opúsculos Históricos* (Porto: Livraria Civilização, 1945), derives from Schott's contaminated recension in *Hispaniae illustratae*, 11, 1285–1300 (see footnote 12 above), and must be used with caution.

16 *Fides religio moresque Aethiopum*, 270. *Legato David Aethiopiae regis* ended with a cognate note that the king's name 'is not Prester John as the vulgar believe, but *gyam* which means powerful', thus revealing that the spurious etymology (unclear, even if we assume that it refers to Amharic *jāňhoy*, 'majesty') was not Šaga za-Ab's invention, but an official policy designed to strengthen the identification. It is curious to find this etymological fake, so proudly proclaimed as a scientific
included the texts of both of Dawit II's embassies (to Manuel I from Legatio, and to João III and Clement VII from Giovio’s translations in Legatio David Aethiopiae regis). To all this Góis added dark hints at Giovio's lack of qualifications for the proposed edition of Álvares's text (250).

By this time Góis was a driven man, fired with a twofold mission to champion both the cause of Ethiopia and Portugal's role in the long-dreamt reconciliation between Western and Eastern Christianity. It must have seemed a task providentially laid upon him, from that moment in 1514 when by chance he had been led in as an unwitting twelve-year old to carry the lamps or hold the door as the bearded Copt and the young makwonnin in his ankle-length breeches stepped across the threshold of King Manuel's chambers. In 1534, during a momentous five-month stay with Erasmus in Freiburg, Góis had notly decried the injustice of the pope’s refusal to admit the Ethiopian church to communion with Rome.17 In 1539 he appended to his account of the siege and defence of the Indian city of Diu against the Turks, dedicated to Cardinal Bembo, an impassioned defence of Portuguese imperialism against the strictures of Paolo Giovio, proclaiming that his countrymen were selfless crusaders divinely elected to spread the gospel in fulfilment of the prophecy in Ps.19.4, 'Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world'.18 And now in 1540 Góis mounted a strenuous publicity campaign on behalf of João III's Ethiopian enterprise, dedicating the Fides religio moresque Aethiopum to Paul III and sending copies to every churchman and scholar he could think of, including Adamus Carolus, Beatus Rhenanus, Bembo, Sadoleto and Reginald Pole.19 In his running battle with Giovio and other rivals Góis had laid hands, at some time before 1540, upon a fresh and more authoritative MS of Francisco Álvares's Verdadera informaçam: this he now offered to translate if the pope would withdraw the commission from Giovio (250). The offer was not taken up,
and Gós had to content himself with forwarding the MS to the great publicist Giovanni Battista Ramusio, who later made use of it for the first book of his celebrated Navigazioni et viaggi, nel qual si contiene la descrizione dell’Africa et del paese del Prete Janni, published at Venice in 1550.20

In 1545 Gós even tried sending a copy of his Aliquot opuscula to the Protestant cosmographer Sebastian Münster, professor of Hebrew at Basle, with whom he had engaged in an acrimonious pamphlet war in 1540–2.21 Münster had made free use of Gós’s geographical texts for his own accounts of Ethiopia and Lapland in the first German edition of his encyclopaedic Beschreibung aller Lender (Basle, 1544), writing in his section ‘Von Priester Johan’ that any reader who desired further details should consult the buchlin of Damianus von Portugall (that is, Fides religio moresque Aethiopum), ‘darausz ich disz genommen hab’. Nevertheless, Münster now ungraciously returned the proffered peace-offering, and, to rub salt into the wound, added to the Latin edition of the same work, Cosmographia universalis (Basle, 1550), an edition of the peculiar Hebrew version of the Epistola Presbyteri Joannis together with an insulting note on ‘Damiano et suae farinae hominibus’ – the jibe being that Gós would have been unable to appreciate this farcical jumble of Jewish nugae, even if he had been learned enough to read Hebrew.22 The more interesting point for us, however, is the evidence which Münster’s account gives that by this date the identification of Ethiopia with the kingdom of the Epistola Presbyteri Joannis was considered an amusing rusticity, although the name ‘Prester John’ continued to be used as shorthand for the negus much in the same way as the Spanish Main continued to be called ‘the Indies’.

The purpose of listing of all these books, which represent only the ‘up-market’ fraction of the total printed output on Prester John and Ethiopia of these years,23 is to record a mental change. Their publication was evidence of great excitement, but their effect was perhaps the opposite of

20 Álvares, Presbyter John of the Indies, 5–10 and passim; Beckingham, ‘Francisco Álvarez and his book on Ethiopia’. It was from Ramusio that Álvares’s text was translated into French, German, Spanish and English.

21 On the famous controversy over the German geographer’s disparaging remarks about Iberia in his edition of Ptolemy’s Geographia, to which Gós replied in Pro Hispania adversus Munsterum defensio (inserted in his Hispania, Louvain: Rutgerus Rescius, 1542, Faria §9), see Hirsch, Damiano de Gós, 130–9.

22 See Ullendorff and Beckingham, The Hebrew Letters of Prester John, 35 and their notes to the Hebrew text, Tofes ha-ktav she-shalah preste yo’an la-pifyor be-romā, from the so-called Ben Sira miscellany of R. Hayyim Qesarini (ed.), Zeh ha-sefer hubbar ‘al ma’alat yisrā’el (Constantinople: R. Astruc of Toulon, 5279/1519 ce).

23 The story of how Poggio’s account was taken over by Jacopo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo (Jacobus Philippus Bergomensis O.E.S.A, 1484–1520), De pontificatu Presbyteri Joannis (first published in the second edition of his widely read Supplementum chronicarum, Brescia, 1485), and hence gave rise to a large popular chapbook literature, is told by Rogers, The Quest for Eastern Christians, 71–113.
what Góis desired. For the new 'scientific' geographical facts about Ethiopia which they claimed to purvey in fact sounded the death-knell of the legend of Prester John of the Indies, at least as it was expounded in the medieval romances of travel from Marco Polo and Mandeville onwards. In 1557, for example, the Spanish Erasmian Andrés Laguna made one of the interlocutors in his remarkable Viaje de Turquia innocently ask the traveller whether he had come across 'el Preste Juan de las Indias de quien tantas cosas nos dizen por acá los peregrinos de Hierusalem', to which he received the following curt answer:

Sabed en dos palabras que es burla llamarle Preste Juan, porque no es sacerdote ni trae ábitos dello, sino un rey que se llama el Preto Juan, y los que le ponen describiendo la Asia en las tablas della no saben lo que se hazen. Por una parte confina con el reino de Egipto y por otra el reyno de Melinde; por la parte occidental confina con los etópex interiores, por la de oriente con la mar Vermeja; y desto da testimonio el rey Manuel de Portugal en la epístola al papa León décimo.

The ultimate influence of Góis's work on this passage is clear, especially in the comically inauthentic correction of preste to preto. His efforts had thus had the paradoxical effect of depriving the Portuguese 'discovery' of its exotic appeal. Now that the facts were more or less established, Catholic opinion affected to discover that Ethiopia's Monophysite church was heretical, and that the resources and power of her king fell short of expectations. Perhaps more importantly, the reader who eagerly scanned Álvares's Verdadera informação or Góis's Fides religio moresque Aethiopum for confirmation of the Epistola Presbyteri Ioannis's glowing account of animal and mineral wealth, of solid rivers of diamonds flowing from Paradise, of glittering palaces and treasuries of precious stones, discovered with dismay that these belonged to the fabulous, not the real Prester John. It was clear, indeed, that Ethiopia was not even, as the best-informed cartographers of Mallorca had once surmised, the source of supply for the great gold caravans of Timbuktu.

The Portuguese were the only Europeans to follow up the new contact with Ethiopia — proof, if it were needed, that commercial greed was never their sole, nor even necessarily their main, motive. However, Dáwit II's letter to João III had requested scholars, goldsmiths, metalworkers, printers, engineers and naval forces; the response was to send an incompetent shoe-string military expedition, European clothes, napkins

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24 Viaje de Turquia, ed. Fernando Garca Salinero (Madrid: Catedra, 1980), 500. For the attribution of the work to Laguna, and a fine analysis of the whole work, see M. Bataillon, Erasmo y España, 2nd edn (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1966), 669-92, who notes on this passage that Fides religio moresque Aethiopum had already been published in the same volume (Antwerp: Martin Nucius, 1544) as Laguna's own De origine regum Turcarum and De Turcarum cultu atque moribus (678, 685-6). Nevertheless, the immediate source is probably Münster, who uses the actual form Preto Iohanne rather than Góis's Pretiosos.
and crockery, catechisms, Latin primers and, later, Jesuits. This order of priorities reflects the comfortable assumption that the Ethiopians should be 'civilized', the missionaries martyred and the faith of old Europe propagated exactly as it might have been to illiterate pagans in the Congo. Dangerous presages of narrow-mindedness were, indeed, already evident in the immediate circumstances of Góis's publication of the *Fides religio moresque Aethiopum*. Ṣagā za-Ab complained that in the seven years he was forced to fret in Portugal without even receiving permission to deliver his king's embassy to the pope in person, the Portuguese ecclesiastical establishment had refused to admit him to the eucharist; apparently they spurned his dietary arrangements as pagan and heretical (*Fides religio moresque Aethiopum*, 264, 267). When Góis's translation of Ṣagā za-Ab's apology for the Ethiopian church reached the hands of the Catholic theologians, they swiftly detected in it a plethora of Jewish, Moorish, and Lutheran 'superstitions'. Worse still, Protestants heaped praise on such Ethiopian practices as the marriage of the clergy, communion in both kinds and absence of tithes and private masses; one professed in a letter, which Góis with characteristic imprudence published in his *Aliquot opuscula* in 1544, to find in the articles of the Coptic faith 'a profound theology . . . even surpassing our own'. Not surprisingly, Góis was soon faced with the crushing indignity of seeing *Fides religio moresque Aethiopum* banned in the very country whose imperial ambitions he had made it his lifelong mission to defend. Despite an official willingness, promoted by the king himself, to play down dogmatic differences in the interests of policy, the Portuguese Inquisition adjudged that Ṣagā za-Ab's superstitions might corrupt their own population of converted Jews and Muslims.

The outcome of this particular encounter of two worlds was therefore disappointingly sordid, however heroic the future efforts of the missionaries. Whatever their confessional allegiance, European scholars— with the honourable but partial exception of Góis himself— were united

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11 Aubin, 'L'ambassade du Prêtre Jean', 39-40 n. 190, gives references on the gifts of clothes and books (described as recently as 1948 by a Portuguese historian as 'para aportuguesamento da Etiópia'); David Hook, 'A note on the books sent to Prester John in 1515 by King Manuel I', *Studia* [Lisbon, Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos], 37 (1973), 303-15, makes the important point that such consignments of books had been a standard feature of Portuguese expeditions to Africa since 1490. On the disastrous military expedition of 1544 see Miguel de Castanhoso, *História das Cousas que o mui esforçado Capitão Dom Cristóvão da Gama fez nos Reinos do Preste João* (1564), ed. Neves Águas (Lisbon: Publicações Europa-América, 1988). The Jesuit missions, which terminated in failure in 1641, are described in the magnificent works by Páez, Almeida, Barradas, Mendes and Jerónimo Lobo published in Beccari's monumental *Rerum Aethiopicarum scriptores occidentales inediti a saeculo XVI ad XIX* (15 vols., Rome, 1903-17).

12 See Marcel Bataillon, 'Le cosmopolitisme de Damião de Góis', in his *Etudes sur le Portugal au temps de l'humanisme* (Coimbra: Acta Universitatis Comeniangensia, 1952), 149-96, pp. 184-91; to which may be added the evidence of the special hostility of the Jesuits, especially in Goa, and of João III's attempts to minimize the obstacles to confessional union in 1522, in Hirsch, *Damião de Góis*, 152-5. It is interesting to note that few, if any, of these Catholic or Protestant readers evinced disquiet at the central difference between the Coptic and Catholic creeds, the heresy of Monophysitism.
in their determination not to 'perceive' the actual Ethiopians: certain foreign customs were 'unlike' their own, while the rest remained simply imperceptible. We should not miss, nevertheless, the real change in perception which had occurred. The progress of the voyages of discovery had, for better or worse, superimposed a different (and only incidentally more accurate) image. The naïve enthusiasm of King Manuel’s interrogation of the Ethiopian embassy of 1514 was fired by the exciting possibility of a scientific solution to the ancient conundrum of the legendary Prester John, for which the Portuguese crown had been searching for at least thirty years; by contrast, the cynical and heavy-lidded reception of the embassy of 1527-33 betrayed a cold conviction that any such search was no longer rational, let alone interesting. The decade spanned by the texts described above had witnessed what Professor Rogers called the 'change from dream to reality' (The Quest for Eastern Christians, 110).

I began by singling out the rather different feat of mental superimposition which was implied by greeting the Ethiopian ambassadors of Däwit II in 1514 as legates from 'the great Prester John, emperor of the Indians'; and it is to this point that I return. For it is clear that such a superimposition could occur only at the precise historical juncture that we have traced out above: the moment of transition from dream to reality, the fleeting overlap between the two mental maps, medieval and early modern, which I have been describing. It so happens that Góis’s texts capture the fumbling readjustment of focus with particular clarity; we catch him withdrawing the rose-tinted filter of legend just as he slips the scientific lens smoothly in behind it.

Before examining this point, however, it is impossible not to remark briefly on the parallel which will inevitably have struck any reader who has come thus far: that is, the parallel with Christopher Columbus’s 'discovery', by a peculiar route, of what he persisted in claiming was the same land as Matéwos and Y’aqob were supposed to have come from, the Indies. The achievement of Columbus has so overshadowed Rodrigo de Lima’s that we often forget that, for his contemporaries (as one of the greatest propagandists of the voyages, Giovanni Battista Ramusio, put it) the Portuguese achievement in at last discovering the true whereabouts of Prester John ‘would profit the world no less than Don Cristoforo Colombo’s discovery’ (Álvares, Prester John of the Indies, 34). What makes the parallel particularly piquant is that Columbus’s conviction that the place he had discovered was India was also motivated, as is well known, by the messianic dream of encircling Islam by an alliance with the fabled Christians of the Orient. For the exotic oriental mirabilia of Marco Polo, Mandeville and Pius II which chiefly inspired Columbus were, as we have seen, inextricably interwoven with the dream of the Indian Jacobites, of the relics of St Thomas, and of Prester John. Hence Columbus, too, carried with him royal letters, written in Arabic, offering an alliance between Spain and the Great Khan (Europe was unaware, of
course, that the Mongol dynasty of China had long since fallen), together with an unfortunate convert Jew who was to act as 'interpreter' in the negotiations. Columbus's logbooks are full of the hare-brained identifications with Cathayan and Indian locations which remind us that the age's greatest navigator was also one of its most incompetent geographers.27 It is hardly surprising that some scholars were confused, like poor Niccolò Scillacio who in his De insulis meridiani atque Indici mari nuper inuentis (Pavia, 1494/5) addressed to Ludovico il Moro on 13 December 1494 confidently identified the lands discovered by Columbus as Ethiopia, Arabia, India and Sheba, and explained that his voyage had 'circumnavigated Africa'.28 We may compare this with the muddle in an English chapbook, Of the newe landes and of the people founde by the messengers of the kyng of Portyngale named Emanuel, printed at Antwerp by John of 'Doesborowe' (i.e. Doesborcht) in about 1511, in which tracts on the Portuguese discoveries on the Malabar coast are printed together with an abbreviated version of Vespucci's Mundus Novus, a treatise on the Indian Christians and a version of Epistola Presbyteri Ioannis. It manages to confuse the issue still further by calling Vespucci's America 'Armenica' or Armenia (Rogers, The Quest for Eastern Christians, 82–3).

The process by which Columbus's dream-geography was superimposed by the map of the New World is a familiar tale with clear parallels to our story of the démystification of Prester John, though it happened more quickly. Rodrigo Fernández de Santaella, for instance, in the 'Cosmographia breve introductoria' with which he prefaced his translation, published in 1503, of Valentim Fernandes's Ho Livro de Marco Paulo (see footnote 8 above), noted that Columbus's Antilia could not be India, and indeed proposed that the very name was derived etymologically from Ante-India, 'opposite India' (as in Antipodes).29 But if the parallels between this pair of 'encounters of two worlds' are striking, the differences make the comparison even more interesting. The Ethiopians were a very different people from the Caribbean Arawak, and indeed from the other African peoples whom the Portuguese had previously encountered: they were Christians about whom Europeans thought they

27 For instance, in the journal of the third voyage, when Columbus believed he had discovered Paradise, he remarked of the four rivers of Eden that 'el Nilo naçe en Ethiopia y va en la mar en Alexandría' (Cristóbal Colón, Textos y documentos completos, ed. C. Varela, Madrid: Alianza, 1984, XXIV, 215) – an innocuous enough remark, unless one tries to work out where, in that case, he thought he was. Ancient commentators identified the river Phison of Gen. 2. 11–12 with the Ganges, and hence India as Haoulah, the land of gold: all this was present to the Genoese explorer's mind when he wrote this passage. Again, he remarked a little later that the terra firma off the Cape Verde islands was 'Ethiopia' (XXIV, 222).
28 C. Merkel, L'opuscolo 'De insulis nuper inuentis' del messinese Niccolò Scillacio (Milan, 1905). Long before, Gilles le Bouvier, herald of Charles VII of France, had said in his Livre de la description de pays (1450s) that if a ship were to sail west of Ireland it would find Prester John (Phillips, Medieval Expansion of Europe, 184).
29 El libro del famoso Marco Paulo (Seville: Stanislao Polono and Jacobo Cromberger, 1503), Norton, Descriptive Catalogue, 280–1, item §743.
already knew a great deal, with a civilization in some respects as advanced as their own – and who had indeed, if the facts were examined, been the ‘discoverers’; at least, it had been they who made the first move. Góis’s *Legatio* thus offers us an excellent comparative test-case to observe a European response to a foreign culture and check it against the better-known American model. In theory, the conditions were ideal: here a proper cultural exchange was possible, with fellow Christians, and if the medieval baggage of preconceptions about Prester John was stronger, Góis was a much better-educated and broad-minded man than Columbus.

On the face of it, Góis’s response to the challenge was exemplary. The most notable fact about both the *Legatio* and *Fides religio moresque Aethiopum* is the large space given in each case to the actual words of Ethiopian informants, unaccompanied by comment, censorship or improving gloss. This was something peculiar to Góis, and one for which, as we have seen, he was made to suffer by the Inquisition. His dispute with Sebastian Münster (see footnote 21 above) had hinged on the very point that a proper geographer should write from first-hand experience, as he himself had of Lapland and Spain (Hirsch, *Damião de Góis*, 22, 132–3); Münster, when he replied biliously that Góis ‘had neither been nor was ever likely to go to the land of Prester John’, showed that he was missing the point, which was Góis’s scrupulous avoidance of adding anything of his own invention to the eyewitness accounts of Matêwos and Šagâ za-Ab.

Nevertheless, even Góis habitually referred to the Ethiopians as *barbari*. Since he was obviously of a very different temper from the prejudiced and intolerant ecclesiastics who refused the sacraments to Šagâ za-Ab, we may ask ourselves why. A clue is perhaps to be found in the ‘articles’ of Matêwos which form the body of his account of the embassy of 1514 (*Legatio*, vi–xiv). These are divided into two sections, separated by a rubric at the head of fol. xi: the first and longest, on the confessional faith, ceremonies and rite of the Ethiopian church (fifty-one articles) and on the office of patriarch and priesthood (fifteen articles); the second, on the kingdom and estate (*status*) of Prester John (twenty-seven articles) and on the king himself and his court (nineteen articles). The division corresponds with the two sides of the divide, standard in contemporary political theory, between the civil and ecclesiastical powers of the commonwealth, but in other respects they are strikingly asymmetrical. The section on ecclesiastical matters addresses clear theological and

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30 Naturally, in October 1520 when the Portuguese arrived at the court of Dâwit II they were subjected to the reverse process of being interrogated about their religion and society (for amusing examples see Álvares, *Prester John of the Indies*, i, 288–94, ii, 528–30).

doctrinal issues, and is obviously aimed at detecting heresies (of which there is a satisfying crop); despite the interesting information which it contains we need look at it no closer. The section on civil matters is more complex. The questions, and the links between them, are rather more difficult to deduce. The first response, for example, tells us that the emperor has an immense multitude of cities and towns in his kingdoms; the second and third, that nobility and plebs are decently distinguished by dress and sumptuary usage; the next three concern merchandise, metallic wealth and coinage, followed by a series of remarks on livestock and crops. Nevertheless, two main motives for the questioning may be detected. The first was the desire to verify the identification with Prester John by reference to his legendary attributes and by geographical detail; the second, somewhat at loggerheads with the supposition that the Ethiopians were long-lost Christian brothers to be welcomed into the bosom of the Latin church, but much more familiar to us from the American analogue, was to run down the checklist of attributes by which medieval and early modern ethnographers distinguished 'civilized' peoples from 'barbarian'.

The clearest indications of the first motive are articles such as §11–12 in the subsection 'De regno et statu imperatoris Presbyteri Ioannis' (Legatio, xii), which affirms:

Imperatoris statum ac ditionem esse omnium amplissimam utpote qui LX christianos ingentium regnorum reges sibi subditos habeat, quos idem legatus suis quosque nominibus singulatim coram nominauit. Praeter sexaginta hos reges quinque adhuc esse reges mahometicos.

The many variant versions of Epistola Presbyteri Ioannis all make play of Prester John’s tributary kings; in some versions the number is seventy-two, in others forty-two, but a sizeable number give sixty or sixty-two. We may surmise that the question was ‘How many subject kings does your emperor have?’ Either Matêwos’s recitation of names was an unintelligible rigmarole to which the number sixty-five was assigned by some suggestive Portuguese listener, or Matêwos himself knew the Prester John legend and had instructions to play it up, or, perhaps more likely, neither side quite understood the other. One can similarly see how article 22, with a description of what appears to be a Western-style military order of the Cross, might be the hybrid product of a simple misunderstanding, on the one hand of a question about the thirteen great crosses of gold each followed by 10,000 knights and 100,000 soldiers which were carried into battle before Prester John (Zarncke, §47), and on the other of an answer

32 See Ullendorff and Beckingham, Hebrew Letters of Prester John, 'Motifs and themes', s.v. 'kings subject to PJ', 166. Compare the wording in Zarncke §§9–13: ‘Si uero uis cognoscere magnitudinem et excellentiam nostrae celatitudinis . . . dominus sum dominantium et praeceello omnes reges uniuersae terrae’; ‘septuaginta duae prouinciae seruiunt nobis, quarum paucae sunt christianorum, et unaquaequae habet regem per se, qui omnes sunt nobis tributarii’.
about the crosses regularly carried by Ethiopians on the matab or neck-cord (Álvares, Prester John of the Indies, II, 516). The most striking example of these kinds of exchange, as I said at the outset, are the first two articles of the subsection 'De eodem [Presbytero Ioanne] et ordine curiae' (Legatio, xiii), complete with classic superimposition:


One need not underline the coincidence between these phrases and the Ethiopian title negus nâgast on one hand, and the inscription of the Epistola Presbyteri Ioannis on the other: 'Presbiter Ioannes potentia et uirtute Dei et domini nostri Iesu Christi rex regum et dominus dominantium' (Zarncke, §1).

The articles which belonged to the second kind, those designed to elicit whether or not the Ethiopians truly belonged to the ranks of the civilized, or to the barbarians and natural slaves of Aristotelian taxonomy, were more surreptitious. It had to be established that the Ethiopians lived a properly civil life, that is to say a life conducted in cities and with the due civic institutions; hence the articles on written laws, law courts and magistrates ('De regno et statu', §§14, 16, 18–19), marriage, family life, inheritance (§23), and commerce (§§4, 25). Other important signs of civility were the possession of a written history (§15), taxes (§20) and proper styles of clothing and social distinction (§§2–3). A question designed to elicit information about eating habits was less innocent than it looked: bestial practices, in the sort of food eaten or the manner in which it was cooked, were notorious give-aways. The answer that Ethiopians eat no pork (§10) is qualified by the statement 'non quod conscientia aut religio id iubeat, sed quod corporis incolumitati sit aduersa', to make it clear that this, like circumcision ('Confessio fidei', §17), was no Jewish or Muslim superstition. Some coy questions and answers about the emperor's wives were designed, one suspects, to elicit — without success — any clue to bestial sexual practices such as matriarchy, polygamy or promiscuity ('De eodem et ordine curiae', §§3, 7).34

33 Góis adds the note: 'Ebessini [sc. Abyssini] sunt praecipui populi Indiae apud quos magnus ille imperator regni sedem habet.'

The interest of the 112 articles on Góis's *Legatio* lies therefore in showing that, even when dealing with the actual representatives of a potential Christian ally in a highly strategic location, the Portuguese prelates, scholars and nobles who interrogated Matêwos in 1514 were unable to discard either the baggage of romantic fable or the Aristotelian traditions about monstrous races. Nor, of course, have Europeans learnt to do much better in Ethiopia in succeeding centuries, as anyone who has lived in that astounding country can readily testify. Góis had never been there; but actual voyages and travels make little difference if, as I have suggested before, the eye misted by preconceptions remains unable to *perceive* an alien culture, incapable of seeing it as governed by an internal logic of its own which might, indeed, regard the European as the odd man out. The Aristotelian typology was the only model available for assessing alien peoples, but it was a model based on power: if one custom was civilized, then another must be barbarous, and the factor which determined which was which turned out to be military might. This fact produced a few interesting *contretemps* in Luso-Ethiopian relations in the 1520s. The most memorable page of Álvares's account of Prester John is the story of how in 1524 Dâwit II instructed him to transliterate into Amharic the captions on a world-map sent by the governor of India (*Prester John of the Indies*, chapter CXV; II, 415-18). Because the scale was small, the friar was constrained 'to put Seville for Spain, Lisbon for Portugal, and Corunna for Galicia'. The *negus* naturally remarked that 'the king of Portugal and the king of Castile were lords of few lands', and doubted whether their aid against the Turks would be of much account. Rodrigo de Lima's reply is a classic of its genre:

The ambassador replied that His Highness was deceived or ill informed; if he judged of it by looking at the map of the world he would not acquire a right knowledge of the countries, because Portugal and Spain *are known parts of the map which require no investigation*. He should observe how small Venice, Jerusalem, and Rome also appeared, as things well known; but let him look at his Ethiopia, how it was an unknown thing, very large and wide and full of mountains and rivers and lions and elephants and other beasts, without the map showing the name of any city, town, or castle!

Lima went on to boast of Portuguese imperial successes in the Indian Ocean. 'To this', records Álvares triumphantly, 'there came no answer.' He did not know, as we do, that the Ethiopians had received intelligence reports (mainly false ones distributed by Muslim agents) that the Portuguese fleets were in fact faring disastrously badly. Lima's self-confidence doubtless prevented him from noticing the expressions on the faces of his interlocutors during this interview; the *negus* himself, by the time-honoured etiquette of the Ethiopian court, was concealed from mortal sight behind a curtain. The next day Álvares was asked to draft a
letter from Dāwit to the pope; Revered by Lions had apparently decided that it was time to approach other powers in Europe.

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