



Prisoners of Prester John: The Portuguese Mission to Ethiopia in Search of the Mythical King, 1520-1526

Cates Baldrige

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During the 16th century, Portugal endeavored to locate the mythical kingdom of Prester John--a Christian nation rumored to be somewhere in the Orient, amidst the pagans and Muslims. This study chronicles Portugal's final attempt, a six-year odyssey in Ethiopia that resulted in a tragicomic collision with a proud but isolated Christian kingdom. After summarizing the Prester John myth and the many efforts it spawned, the work focuses on the Ethiopian mission's chronicler, Father Francisco Alvares, who fell in love with the country and its people, became a friend of its king, hid the Abyssinians' heresies from his superiors, and set in motion events that saved Ethiopia from imminent destruction. Unique in the annals of Europeans' initial contacts with African peoples, the Portuguese mission is a portrait of hopeful preconceptions buffeted and eventually transformed by encounters with a fascinating, utterly unexpected reality.

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