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CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES OF EAST AFRICA IN THE IMAGINATION OF MEDIEVAL EUROPEANS

Abstract. The paper explores the issue of understanding Africa and African culture during the Middle Ages. Throughout centuries, European scholars, travellers and even knights (e.g. crusaders) encountered people of African origin as well as legends and unproven stories describing mysterious Christian states, societies and cultures, existing beyond the Sahara desert. One of the most significant outcomes of that were medieval maps and descriptions, presenting the extent of knowledge the Europeans had of medieval Africa and setting the limits of medieval imagination. The 14th-century *Libro del Conosçimiento de todos los reynos y tierras* (*The Book of the Knowledge of All the Kingdoms*) is one of the best examples of that. The names of those mysterious states, their coats of arms as well as information about their enemies or allies can be found in this medieval compendium.

Keywords: medieval culture; African medieval states; medieval Christian communities in Africa; medieval imagination

CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIE SPOŁECZNOŚCI AFRYKI WSCHODNIEJ W WYOBRAŹNI ŚREDNIOWIECZNYCH EUROPEJCZYKÓW

Abstrakt. Artykuł podejmuje problematykę rozumienia Afryki i kultury afrykańskiej w średniowieczu. Przez wieki europejscy uczeni, podróżnicy, a nawet rycerze (np. krzyżowcy) spotykali się z ludźmi pochodzenia afrykańskiego, a także z legendami i niesprawdzonymi opowieściami opisującymi tajemnicze państwa, społeczeństwa i kultury chrześcijańskie, istniejące poza Saharą. Jednym z najważniejszych efektów tych kontaktów były średniowieczne mapy i opisy geograficzne, prezentujące stan europejskiej wiedzy o średniowiecznej Afryce i jednocześnie wyznaczające granice ówczesnej wyobraźni. *Libro del Conosçimiento de todos los reynos y tierras* (Księga wiedzy o wszystkich królach i ziemiach z XIV w.) jest jednym z najlepszych przykładów w tym

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zakresie. W tym średniowiecznym kompendium wiedzy geograficznej można znaleźć nazwy tajemniczych afrykańskich państw, ich herby, a także informacje o ich wrogach i sojusznikach.

Słowa kluczowe: kultura średniowieczna; średniowieczne państwa afrykańskie; średniowieczne wspólnoty chrześcijańskie w Afryce; średniowieczna wyobraźnia

Disputes over the cultural or civilisational provenance of particular peoples, states or societies are a natural part of the current scientific discourse. In a broader context, such discourse also attempts to define the civilisational profile of larger entities such as continents (including the African continent). However, the enormous diversity of communities inhabiting this continent often prevents the formulation of uniform and reliable conclusions regarding the entire study area. This diversity follows from different experiences, whether historical, religious or even those related to food-gathering techniques.

The rich diversity is also an exceptional challenge (if not a nightmare) for researchers trying to discover, on one hand, elements which are common, universal and characteristic for all cultures, and, on the other hand, phenomena that are culturally unique and typical only of particular communities. What matters, after all, is the preservation of traditions, traits, behaviours or choices made in the past that may constitute the basis of identity for today's increasingly diverse communities. Having inevitably experienced cultural mixing and globalisation (even if only at technological levels), many of them are already on the verge of cultural confusion.

The general dispute over cultural belonging is not only a sign of the current times. Its history is very rich, full of interesting events and conflicts, not only of an armed nature. It still seems worthwhile – especially in the context of contemporary discussions – not to lose sight of certain historical events during which significant cultural or religious choices were made.

In the history of East Africa, medieval Nubia played a special role in establishing cultural and religious standards. Existing in an independent form from the fifth to almost the fourteenth century, this state controlled an important section of the so-called Sudan Corridor, centred around the Nile, i.e. the main line of communication of this part of Africa.[1] As a natural link between Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa, Nubia was subjected to both Egyptian, Roman (and later Arab) influences, as well as those coming from the heart of

[1] Julia Budka, "Crossing Borders: Settlement Archaeology in Egypt and Sudan," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 80, no. 1 (2017): 15–17, 19.

the continent, resulting from its natural contacts with medieval communities inhabiting the equatorial region.

With its predominantly black population, medieval Nubia also allowed the introduction of many political, cultural and religious practices from the Mediterranean area.[2] One of the most important milestones in the history of this state (or states, as Nubia was divided into three equal kingdoms in the medieval period) was the adoption of Christianity from Constantinople, initially in the form of both Monophysitism (kingdoms of Nobatia, Alodia) and Chalcedonian Christianity (Makuria).[3] By the end of the 7th century, however, all three Nubian states appear to have finally adopted Monophysitism and submitted to the Patriarch of Alexandria.[4]

The fact that the decision to adopt Christianity was not the result of any immediate political situation or compulsion soon became apparent when, as a result of the Arab invasion, the rule of Christian Byzantium in Egypt collapsed, forcing Nubia to defend its borders. This courageous and adamant decision to keep the Christian faith should be taken as proof that the earlier decision to introduce Christianity was made by the Nubians fully intentionally and independently. Despite significant Muslim pressure, both political and – perhaps even more – religious, and especially with no hope for help from Christian Byzantium, which was defeated by the Muslims, Nubia chose to defend its Christian faith and political identity.

The establishment of the Arab empire, the Muslim occupation of Egypt the northern part of the Red Sea and the entire southern Mediterranean coastline from the mid-7th century onwards, resulted in the irreversible isolation of Christian Nubia from fellow Christians. Any relations between Nubia and Constantinople or Christian Europe (including political, economic or cultural relations) became very difficult, if not impossible, or were completely severed. However, Byzantine culture was constantly present in the kingdoms of Nubia, but in more and more limited forms.[5] Here, it is worth mentioning the Greek manuscripts discovered at Qasr Ibrim, containing a prayer for King Kudanbes (1322–1324), the last Christian Nubian ruler. The Nubian ruler

[2] Eugen Strouhal, "Anthropology of the Christian Population at Sayala (Egyptian Nubia, 6th-11th Century AD): Preliminary Report," *Anthropologie* 30, no. 1 (1992): 85–87.

[3] Lawrence P. Kirwan, "The Birth of Christian Nubia. Some Archaeological Problems," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 58, nos. 1–4 (1984): 119–32.

[4] William H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 330ff.

[5] "The Byzantine influence was inherited from the beginning in Nubia." Fawzy F. Gadallah, "The Egyptian Contribution to Nubian Christianity," *Sudan Notes and Records* 40 (1959): 42.

was referred to as "basileus" in this text, which included a Christian prayer to Archangel Michael.

The Byzantine origin of this title can be considered a great testimony to Nubia's belonging to the world of civilisation originating in Constantinople.[6] It is also worth mentioning that Mercurius, one of the first Nubian rulers, who united Nobatia and Makuria under his reign around 700, was called "New Constantine" in the oldest texts of his epoch. In addition to the titles of rulers, some offices found at the courts of Nubian kings also had names evidently taken from ancient and medieval Byzantine court traditions. The Nubian provincial governor was called eparch (*eparchos*), while other court officials (corresponding in the Latin world to primicerius or protodomesticus) were called meizoteris and protomeizoteris.[7]

Another space where Byzantine influences became clearly discernible was in Nubian ecclesiastical art. A common practice in the interiors of medieval Nubian temples was the use of the Corinthian order in the ornamentation of columns and pillars. Also, the architectural layout of some Nubian ecclesiastical buildings was very similar to churches built within the Byzantine Empire.[8]

However, the awareness of ancient relations was not only noticeable in Nubia. The existence of this Christian African state was also known in countries that were once part of the medieval Eastern Roman Empire.[9] A good example of this was the functioning of religious buildings belonging to the

[6] Kirwan, "Birth of Christian Nubia," 126.

[7] Stanley M. Burstein, "When Greek Was and African Language. The Role of Greek Culture in Ancient and Medieval Nubia," *Journal of World History* 19, no. 1 (2008): 56–57. Fawzy Gadallah mentions the following aspects: "the Byzantine influences in Christian Nubia, such as the Greek language used in the epitaphs, the Byzantine names, the contents of the Nubian religious books as stated by the medieval Arab historians, the Byzantine titles in Nubia such as 'Eparch' and 'Domestikos', and the Byzantine influence in architecture," Gadallah, "Egyptian Contribution," 42.

[8] A significant period of Byzantine influence in Nubia may have been the Iconoclasm (second half of the 8th century) in Byzantium itself, when many monks and artists were forced to emigrate to various territories outside the Byzantine Empire, likely including Nubia. This is evidenced by typically Byzantine influences, which were discovered in Faras Cathedral. More about this in the following works: Peter L. Shinnie, "Christian Nubia," in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 2, *C. 500 BC–AD 1050*, ed. John D. Fage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1978), 570; Derek Welsby, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia: Pagans, Christians and Muslims along the Middle Nile* (London: British Museum Press, 2002), 155; William Y. Adams, "Architectural Evolution of the Nubian Church, 500–1400 A.D.," *Journal of American Research Center in Egypt* 4 (1965): 87–139; Katarzyna Mich, "Chrzest w kościele nubijskim – próba rekonstrukcji liturgii," *Annales Missiologici Posnanienses* 20 (2015): 155.

[9] Susan van Zanten, "Introduction. African Narrative and the Christian Tradition. Storytelling and Identity," *Christianity and Literature* 61, no. 3 (2012): 369.

Nubians and located in the area of Palestine and the later Crusader States. Among these is the Nubian chapel (*Capella Nubiana*) at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which must be mentioned. It is likely that this sacred object was located there since the beginning of the reign of the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt, which soon took power in Palestine and Jerusalem itself. According to some researchers, the Nubian chapel in Jerusalem was allegedly in continuous operation until 1480, when it was handed over to the Armenian Church. Also at that time (late 15th century), another Nubian chapel, located in Bethlehem, was given to the Coptic church.[10]

It is, however, hard to show any indisputable and long-lasting examples of cooperation between the Crusaders and the Nubian Christians. It seems reasonable to assume that the European conquerors of Jerusalem may have seen them only as part of a large, exotic mass of schismatics or heretics illegally living near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as well. The active participation of the Nubians in the formation of the Muslim garrison of Jerusalem, and their service as the guard of the Caliph of Egypt, may have made it even more difficult for the Crusaders – who were rather poor diplomats – to see them as Christian brothers who had persevered in their faith for centuries. The peaceful policy of the Fatimids towards other religions could have paradoxically resulted in the Crusaders being confronted by Christians (or people with Christian roots) serving in the Arab army during the Crusades.[11] Nevertheless, the difficulties in mutual relations were further aggravated by certain legendary elements, which, once the Crusaders finally installed themselves in the Holy Land, gradually began to reach them. Tales of the existence of mysterious and distant Christian states may have stirred the imagination of the participants in subsequent Crusades.

The notion of a mysterious African ruler who believed in Christ shed a new light on the Nubian church and became deeply embedded in European consciousness and culture. Robert de Clari, one of the French Crusaders who conquered Constantinople in the early years of the 13th century, wrote in his memoirs about his 1203 encounter in Constantinople with the “Black King”, who was making a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella, travelling via

[10] Roland Werner, William Anderson, and Andrew Wheeler, *Day of Devastation, Day of Contentment: The History of the Sudanese Church across 2000 Years* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Press, 2000), 58–61.

[11] Steven Runciman mentions a Nubian, Al-Mutamen, who was the Caliph’s confidential advisor, who secretly wrote in 1169 to Jerusalem to promise assistance to Franks during their invasion of Egypt; Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, vol. 2, *The Kingdom of Jerusalem and the Frankish East 1100–1187* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 385–86.

Jerusalem, Constantinople and Rome.[12] Robert de Clari's attention was drawn to the cross burned into, or rather tattooed on, the King's forehead. The deep astonishment expressed by Robert de Clari and other French knights at the sight of that Nubian ruler shows that at that time the presence of Christians in Nubia was still shrouded in mystery for Western Europe.[13] This, of course, affected subsequent legends that arose in Europe. One of them includes the legend of the Three Kings, attributed to John of Hildesheim, which claims that one of the wise men, Melchior, was a Nubian.[14]

One legend, which was very popular in the Western world, must have played a role as well. It says there was a state ruled by a legendary ruler-priest, Prester John, located very differently – from far-off Asia to the Nile valley.[15] Hopes may have been raised by the fact that the Muslims could be attacked from two sides, and rumours began to circulate of that ruler's alleged promises to come to the aid of Jerusalem.[16] This legend, fantastically enhanced, already cast the Christians who had been expelled from the Latin world in a somewhat different light. The attitude of the successive Patriarchs of Jerusalem, who were slow to recognise the diversity and complexity of the situation of the Eastern Church, might also have played a role.

In view of the above, we can say the realm of Christian, Western European imagination itself had a lot of relevance, being strongly fuelled by various

[12] Robert de Clari, *La conquête de Constantinople*, ed. Philippe Lauer (Paris: Édouard Champion, 1924), chap. 54. On this, see also Runciman, *Kingdom of Acre*, 483.

[13] On "black Christian kings and warriors" see Elizabeth Zacharopoulou, "The Black St Maurice of Magdeburg and the African Christian Kingdoms in Nubia and Ethiopia in the Thirteenth Century," *The Southern African Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 25 (2015): 77–110.

[14] E.g. in "Liber de Trium Regum corporibus Coloniam translantis"; see in Jutta Seibert, *Lexikon christlicher Kunst. Themen, Gestalten, Symbole* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2002).

[15] On this matter see the following: Martin Gosman, "Otton de Freising et le Prêtre Jean," *Revue belge de philologie et d'historie* 61 (1983): 270–85; Ulrich Knefelkamp, *Die Sage nach dem Reich des Priesterkönigs Johannes. Dargestellt anhand von Reisengerichten und anderen ethnographischen Quellen des 12. bis 17. Jahrhunderts* (Gelsenkirchen: Müller, 1986); Michael D. Uebel, "Prester John," in *Trade, Travel and Exploration in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. John Block Friedman and Kristen Mossler Figg (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 504–5; Robert Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1996); Michael E. Brooks, "Prester John: A Reexamination and Compendium of the Mythical Figure Who Helped Spark European Expansion," PhD diss., University of Toledo, 2009; Keagan Brewer, ed., trans., *Prester John: The Legend and its Sources* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), and a review by Nicolas Morton in *Speculum Review* 91, no. 4 (2016): 1076–77; Ahmed M. A. Sheir, *The Prester John Legend between East and West during the Crusades* (Budapest: Trivent Publishing, 2022).

[16] Sheir, 65–102; Meir Bar-Ilan, "Prester John: Fiction and History," *History of European* Ideas 201, nos. 1–3 (1995): 291–98; on this see also Jacqueline Pirenne, *La légende du Prétre Jean* (Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 1992).

rumours and legends originating in the Latin-Arab frontier. Legends and stories (or perhaps just rumours) found eager audiences, as the prospect of reclaiming the Holy Sepulchre was still treasured, particularly in the decades following the Muslims' final conquest of the last parts of the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

This is why the opinions given in one of the 14th-century descriptions of the world – intended to present and characterise all the states and kingdoms known at that time – seem very interesting and important for our considerations. An anonymous book known in English as *The Book of the Knowledge of All the Kingdoms, Lands and Lordships That Are in The World*[17] is still the subject of scholarly discussion, although there can hardly be any doubts it was written after 1348. Its anonymous author, writing in Spanish and considered by many earlier scholars as being a member of the Franciscan Order (?), did not personally undertake the journeys described in his work, contrary to what he claims there.

Numerous errors, anachronisms or geographical inaccuracies suggest that the author made the imaginary voyage by "just moving his finger across the map", meaning that he looked at and summarised the world maps known to him at the time.[18] The choice of the presented information indicates his probable knowledge of maps created in the Catalan or Italian circle (e.g. the Medici Atlas). However, the verification of the data provided by the *The Book*, as well as the establishment of the sources of author's knowledge is beyond of the scope of this paper.[19] To us, it is much more important to determine the vantage point from which this anonymous author regarded medieval Nubia and the neighbouring African states of the time.[20]

[17] Clements R. Markham's English edition is based on the 1877 edition by Marcos Jiménez de la Espada. See Bibliography.

Steven Ashley, "The Book of Knowledge: A Late Fourteenth-Century Armorial Travelouge of all the Kingdoms in the World," *The Coat of Arms* 4, no. 238 (2021): 4–5. Ashley doubts in the Author's Franciscan provenance (p. 3) and locates the book's narrator close to 1360 (p. 3). For a general study of medieval maps, see John B. Harley David Woodward, *History of Cartography,* vol. 1, *Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[19] Drawing on studies of N. F. Marino and J. M. Laccara, Ashley (p. 3) supposes that in this source there are a lot of similarities with two "the portolani maps" by Angelino Dulcert (or Dalorto) (from 1339) and the 1375 Catalan Atlas.

[20] His knowledge of Christian states in Africa (Nubia especially) was outdated because the collapse of Nubian Christian State began in the 1270s and was not complete until the half of the next century: Muhammad M. Musad, "The Downfall of the Christian Nubian Kingdoms," *Sudan Notes and Records* 40 (1959): 124; Giovanni Vantini, *Christianity in the Sudan* (Bologna: EMI, 1981), 176.

First of all, it must be said that the information of immediate relevance to us can be found in Manuscript "S" held by the Spanish National Library (see the Bibliography), as it is provided on two parallel planes: iconographic and textual. The former is composed of individual images of coats of arms. Simply speaking, paragraphs of the text, roughly corresponding to successive kingdoms or lands, are separated by colourful illustrations of the coats of arms of the states concerned. The question of the actual presence of European heraldry in African, Arab, Persian or Chinese states will be omitted in this paper.[21]

It goes without saying that the coats of arms depicted in the book are rather figments of the author's imagination. Still, it is precisely his imagination that is crucial to us because it represents his way of perceiving the world. Specific coats of arms share not only the knowledge about various countries at that time, but also the emotions, memories and (sometimes authentic) sentiments associated with them. The iconographic layer played an essential role, especially with regard to the so-called terra incognita. Even before reading, the readers were able to quickly find out which states the book described and how they should be perceived – whether they were friendly or hostile, Christian or not.

The description of the four Christian African states is clearly a distinctive part of the book. Although only three coats of arms are associated with these states (one coat of arms is featured twice) and only two colours were used to draw them (black and the natural white colour of parchment), it is evident that they are Christian countries. Between the pages with coats of arms related to the Muslim religion (crescents, scarves, palm trees, stars, stylised Arabic letters) or paganism (images of idols), there are four coats of arms imitating a cross. According to the author of this copy of the *Libro* (Manuscript "S"), the Kingdom of Dongola (apparently identical to Christian Nubia) used a coat of arms depicting a black double (patriarchal) cross against a white background.[22] The same coat of arms was used by the state of Magdasor (lo-

[21] An exhaustive analysis of the coats of arms in this book is presented in Ashley, "Book of Knowledge," 14–37; see other studies on that: Martin de Riquer, *Heráldica castellane en tiempos de los Reyes Católicos*, Bibioteca Filológica 1 (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1986); de Riquer, "La heráldica en el Libro del Conoscimiento y el problema de su datación," *Dicenda: Cuadernos de Filologia Hispánica, Estudios y textos dedicatos a Francisco López Estrada* 6 (1987): 313–20.

[22] Manuscript "S", 28. This coat of arms is described in Ashley, "Book of Knowledge," 21: "Argent a double cross formy sable."

cated roughly in the Abyssinia area).[23] On the other hand, a black Greek cross against a white background was used by the mysterious Christian state of Abdeselib (probably located to the west of Nubia),[24] while the same cross, with two crosiers on either side, was used by the ruler of a separate state, Prester John, residing in Malsa (located between Magdasor to the east and Nubia and Abdeselib to the west).[25] The use of the cross for these four states can be interpreted as an expressive sign of communion and unity in faith between Christian Crusader Europe and the distant African states. It seems that the use of a double (patriarchal) cross for the coats of arms of Nubia and Magdasor[26] might also have been significant. It was there, according to the author of the source in question, that Prester John (Preste Johin in Manuscript "S"[27]) was to exercise patriarchal authority. From the perspective of the canon law of the time, this claim was a clear exaggeration. According to the custom sanctioned by Justinian the Great in the sixth century, the existence of only five Christian patriarchates was recognised: in Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch. However, granting Christians of sub-Saharan Africa the right to have a patriarch (even against tradition) was not only an important step towards recognising the antiquity of their Church, but it also drew the attention of European Christians to the presence of fellow Christians to the south of the most remote borders of Egypt as well.

The textual layer of the excerpt from *The Book*, which is of interest to us and parallel to the iconographic layer described above, contains a lot more information. First of all, it should be noted that the author tried to point to the common experience of Europeans and Africans of having to defend the Christian faith and freedom against Muslim invaders, especially from Northwest Africa. It was there that the author located the main threat against which the Christian African states united. The heroic state of Abdeselib, with its capital in Graçiona, was supposedly the main defensive location for the Christians (and their patriarch Prester John).[28]

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[23] Manuscript "S", 33; Ashley, 26: "Argent a cross paty sable" (Magdasor is identified by Ashley as Mogadishu in Somalia).

[24] Called Graçiona (identified as Civitas Syone, Aksum in Ethiopia) in Ashley, 23: "Argent a cross paty throughout sable."

[25] Manuscript "S", 31–32; Ashley, "Book of Knowledge," 29–30: "Argent a Latin cross paty between two crooks sable."

[26] On the Double Cross (Patriarch Cross) see Gerd Oswald, *Lexikon der Heraldik* (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institute, 1984), 102 ("Doppelkreuz").

[27] E.g. page 31v.

[28] *Book of Knowledge*, 35–36 (Markham's edition).

Secondly, it is clear from the excerpt that the Christian African states described there were militarily strong, warlike, populous, prosperous and abounding in castles and cities (presumably from the European perspective). For example, it is emphasised that the people of Abdeselib had sufficient supplies of very good drinking water.[29] Dongola (Nubia), on the other hand, was said to abound in fruit trees.[30] No doubt, the overall image of the four states was favourable, in both military (sizeable human resources) and economic terms. Emphasising these exact qualities of the discussed states may evoke rather recent (in relation to the probable time of writing this book) memories of the Crusaders, who reached African deserts. After all, the need to find water or food was one of the main problems of the European knights, not adapted to the tropical climate, who were dying in the heat without being able to quench their thirst. Meanwhile, the author of the *Libro* seemed to unambiguously indicate that just beyond the seemingly insurmountable "sea of Sahara" existed friendly and Christian states, rich in fresh water and fruit. That said, going out into the desert did not have to mean inevitable death, as help and respite from African Christians was available, after all, to those who persevered. Moreover, the heroic experiences of these people in the long struggle against the Muslims could prove invaluable for subsequent Crusaders, who would take up arms against the followers of Allah again. The Christian African states might thus have been seen as valuable allies, especially in military terms. Establishing cooperation with them and making them aware of their common faith could have resulted in surrounding Muslims during the next, possible Crusade, i.e. attacking them both from the north and south (from the Sahara).[31]

However, a courageous desert crossing to the Christian African states had not only military (opening a new front), political (forming new alliances) or economic (gaining access to water or food) value. According to the author of the source in question, there was to be a Terrestrial Paradise somewhere to the south of Prester John's country.[32] This unusual and mysterious place,

[29] *Book of Knowledge*, 36.

[30] *Book of Knowledge*, 32.

[31] On these plans, also in wider context, see Verena Krebs, "Re-Examining Foresti's Supplementum Chronicarum and the 'Ethiopian' Embassy to Europe of 1306," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (2019): 493–515. Also, different expectations concerning Muslim–Christian struggle are discussed in Ahmed M. A. Sheir, "From a Christian Saviour to a Mongol Ruler: The Influence of Prester John's Glamor on the Muslim-Crusader Conflict in the Levant, 1140s-1250s," *Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea* 3 (2018): 27–43.

[32] *Book of Knowledge*, 36–37.

from which the four largest rivers in the world of that time sprang – the Tigris, the Euphrates (here identified with the Nile), the Gion and the Pison – could have been the final destination of many Christians.

Apart from many wonders and curiosities to be found there, the Terrestrial Paradise and its immediate surroundings had one extraordinary quality. According to the author, it was a place where no living thing – not a single plant or animal – could rot, be destroyed, or die.[33] Reaching this place of eternal life and happiness might have provided a strong impetus for undertaking further Crusades and war expeditions, which were no less important than recapturing the Holy Sepulchre from Muslim hands. However, if the spiritual and ageless values were still not attractive enough for the future armed pilgrims, the *Libro* also pointed out some more tangible advantages of those lands. It was noted that in addition to the natural riches these lands possessed, they also offered numerous trade links based on the lucrative ivory and teeth trade (most likely hippopotamus teeth). Genoese merchants, whose presence in these countries is often mentioned in this book, could have been good intermediaries.[34]

The last account of interest to us, taken from *The Book* and concerning the Christian African states, was that about their eminently African characteristics and the African origin of their inhabitants. It was stressed that the inhabitants of Nubia and Abdeselib alike were black. Being "delicate" of some sorts, the author was kind enough to state that, for example, "the black inhabitants of Abdeselib are intelligent and have 'good brains', understanding and knowledge."[35] On the other hand, the inhabitants of the area of the Terrestrial Paradise who live close to the place from which the rivers of the paradise flow from waterfalls to irrigate, among others, the whole of Nubia and Ethiopia, are deaf and cannot hear each other because of the noise generated there. But it was in the nearby country of Priest John that people who possessed a great knowledge of the stars, of magical powers and of herbs, plants and minerals were supposed to live.[36]

The verification of the above descriptions, updating them if required, or the problem of the exact location of the mentioned states, does not fall within the scope of this paper. It appears that probably a significant part of the

[33] *Book of Knowledge*, 37.

[34] *Book of Knowledge*, 35. Information provided by Genoese merchants was referenced on pages 32, 36, 38.

[35] *Book of Knowledge*, 36.

[36] *Book of Knowledge*, 37.

information given in the book can be regarded as legendary or even completely fictitious.[37] Still, it is more important to us that the author (and probably the readers of his book) saw the political division of Central Africa in this way and expected the reality to correspond with the information given in his book. On the other hand, however, it is worth remembering that he repeatedly referred to accounts and information obtained from Genoese merchants, whose representatives were said to visit these countries quite often.

In conclusion, the attitude of the Christian states of medieval Europe towards fellow Christians living in medieval Africa did not appear to undergo any exceptional, particularly significant changes. Despite the awareness of the value of Christian allies in Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa, the possibility of potential cooperation throughout the Crusade period and immediately afterwards was faint, to say the least. No joint political or military action was ever taken. An important role was probably played by the shortage of knowledge about the Christian states of Africa, uncertainty about their religious orthodoxy, and the inability to recognise larger and smaller potential allies siding with the enemy (Nubian Christians served in the Egyptian Fatimid army, as we mentioned above). However, a certain change was undoubtedly brought about by the last three military Crusades (the first two started in 1218 and in 1249), moving the theatre of military operations to Egypt and the Nile Delta.[38] The last Crusade started in 1270 is particularly important because, following various political decisions, it focused on Tunis itself, hoping, to no avail, that the Muslim authorities there would support the Crusaders in the fight against Egypt.[39] As a result, we can see that the initial aversion to African Christians slowly began to be replaced by cool detachment, which, in the face of new challenges and threats (and especially in the face of the conquest of the last parts of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1292), gradually started to transform into some kind of cautious expectation with a good deal of hope.

In the context of the problem of slow recognition of fellow African Christians by European Christians, the above-mentioned theme of the encounter of the Nubian Christian king by the Crusaders in Constantinople in 1203 becomes very symbolic. For European knights, that black ruler with a cross

[37] On this see especially Adam Knobler, "The Power of Distance: The Transformation of European Perceptions of Self and Other, 1100–1600," *Medieval Encounters* 19 (2013): 434–80.

[38] Runciman, *History of the Crusades*, 3:163 (on hopes for allies, also about Prester John), 167–70 (the Fifth Crusade in Africa), 261–79 (1249 in Damietta).

[39] Runciman, 290–92.

branded on his forehead and coming from (as he himself stated) lands that were a hundred days' march away from Jerusalem, was still merely an interesting curiosity and a "cultural attraction" of some sorts, a witness to the existence of distant and mysterious – but at the same time thoroughly anonymous – lands.[40] However, for the author of the *Libro*, who wrote about the event a century and a half later, this encounter would no longer be surprising. Not only was he already able to tell the specific name of this African kingdom (Abdeselib), which was inhabited by black Christians and where they burned a cross with fire as a sign of baptism, but also he "knew" the name of its capital (Graçiona) and could explain the name of the state ("Servant of the Cross"). He "was familiar with" the resources of the kingdom, he "was aware" that they had great water to drink, he "knew" their friends and enemies, and he even wanted to describe them with a very Western European-like coat of arms.[41] However, as we noted above, it is not our purpose to verify the information given in the *Libro del conosçimiento de todos los reynos e tierras*. The mere fact of having such rather largely unverified (or even unverifiable) information can hardly be considered a sign of advances in knowledge. Still, this undeniably greater interest in the previously unknown lands has a profound significance of its own. Even if the information concerning African Christians was incomplete, inaccurate or even completely wrong or simply made up, the inhabitants of those distant lands were no longer anonymous for the European elite of the medieval world. They had their own place on the map of the European medieval imagination. Now, the question arises: did the European rulers of the time have the same place in the minds of the inhabitants of the Christian lands in Africa?

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[40] On this, see especially Zacharopoulou, *Black St Maurice*, 82–90.

[41] Page 36 of the English edition of *The Book of Knowledge* and page 31 of the manuscript *Libro de conosçimiento*.

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