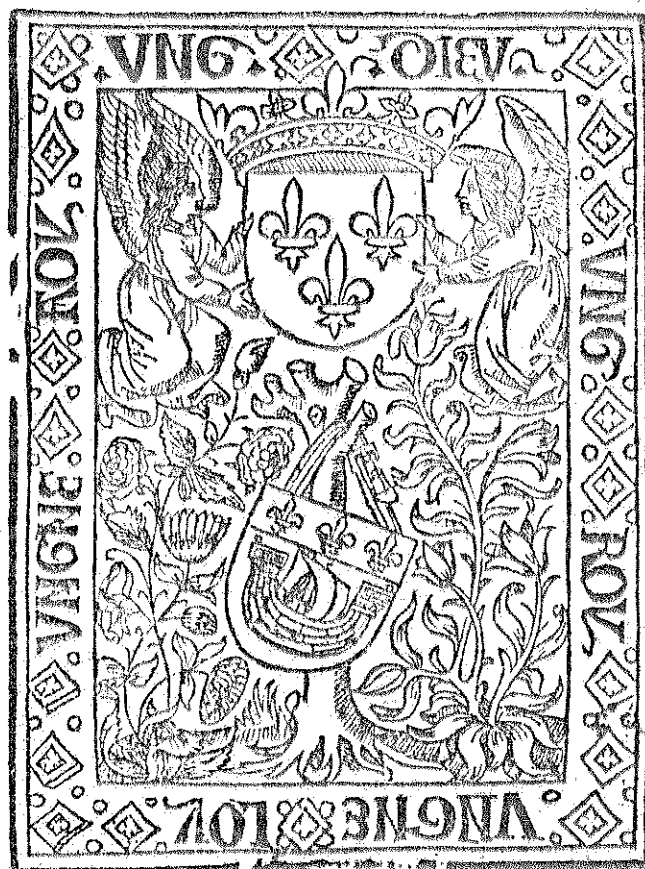


Sensuient plusieurs nouvelles et
diversitez estans entre les bestes en la
terre de Prestre Jehan.



THE TRANSLATION



PRESTER JOHN, by the Grace of God most powerful king over all Christian kings, greetings to the Emperor of Rome and the King of France, our friends. We wish you to learn about us, our position, the government of our land, and our people and beasts. And since you say that our Greeks, or men of Grecian race, do not pray to God the way you do in your country, we let you know that we worship and believe in Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost, three persons in one Deity and one true God only. We attest and inform you by our letter, sealed with our seal, of the condition and character of our land and men. And if you desire something that we can do for you, ask us, for we shall do it gladly. In case you wish to come hither to our country, we shall make you on account of your good reputation our successors and we shall grant you vast lands, manors, and mansions.

Let it be known to you that we have the highest crown on earth as well as gold, silver, precious stones and strong fortresses, cities, towns, castles, and boroughs. We have under our sway forty-two kings who all are mighty and good Christians. And

know that we maintain for the glory and love of Jesus Christ all the poor of our country, be they our men or foreigners.

Know also that we have promised and sworn in our good faith to conquer the Sepulcher of our Lord and the whole Promised Land. And if you wish and it pleases God, we shall have it; but may you too display the great and steadfast valor which is yours, since we were told of your true and loyal courage. But there are other Frenchmen among you of your lineage and from your retinue who hold with the Saracens. You confide to them and trust them that they should and will help you, but they are the false and treacherous Hospitalers. Know that we have killed them in our country as it should be done with those who turn against the faith.¹

Our land is divided into four parts, for there are so many Indias. In Greater India lies the body of the Apostle Saint Thomas for whom our Lord has wrought more miracles than for the [other] saints who are in heaven. And this India is toward the East, for it is near the deserted Babylon and also near the tower called Babel.² In another province toward the North there is a great abundance of bread, wine, meat, and everything necessary for the human body.

There are in our country elephants and other animals called dromedaries and also white horses and wild bulls of seven horns, white bears, and the strangest lions of red, green, black, and blue color. We have also wild asses with two little horns, wild hares as big as sheep, and swift horses with two little horns who gallop faster than any other animal. You should also know that we have birds called griffins who can easily carry an ox or a horse into their nest to feed their young. We have still another kind of birds

who rule over all other fowl in the world. They are of fiery color, their wings are as sharp as razors, and they are called Yllerion.³ In the whole world there are but two of them. They live for sixty years, at the end of which they fly away to plunge into the sea. But first they hatch two or three eggs for forty days till the young ones come out. Then the old pair, father and mother, take off and go to drown themselves in the sea, as it was said before. And all the birds who meet them escort them till they are drowned. And when this has happened, the companions return and they go to the fledglings and feed them till they grow up and can fly and provide for themselves. Likewise, you should know that we have other birds called tigers who are so strong and bold that they lift and kill with ease an armored man together with his horse.⁴

Know that in one province of our country is a wilderness and that there live horned men who have but one eye in front and three or four in the back. There are also women who look similar. We have in our country still another kind of men who feed only on raw flesh of men and women and do not hesitate to die. And when one of them passes away, be it their father or mother, they gobble him up without cooking him. They hold that it is good and natural to eat human flesh and they do it for the redemption of their sins. This nation is cursed by God and it is called Gog and Magog and there are more of them than of all other peoples. With the coming of the Antichrist they will spread over the whole world, for they are his friends and allies. This was the people that enclosed the King Alexander in Macedonia and put him into prison from which he escaped. But God will send upon them lightning and scorching fire which will burn and disperse them along with the Antichrist, and in such a way they will be destroyed and

routed. None the less we take many of them with us into war, whenever we wish to wage one, and we give them license and permission to eat our enemies, so that of a thousand not a single remains who is not devoured and consumed. But later we send them home, because, if they were to stay with us longer, they would eat us all.⁵ We have in our country also other men who have hooved legs like horses and at the back of their heels they have four strong and sharp claws with which they fight in such a way that no armor can withstand them; and yet they are good Christians and willingly till their lands and ours and pay us annually a big tribute.

In another region of the wilderness we have a country that extends for forty-two days' journey and it is called the Great Feminie. Do not think that it is in the land of the Saracens, for the one we are talking about is in our country. In that land there are three queens and many other ladies who hold their lands from them. And when these three queens wish to wage war, each of them leads with her one hundred thousand armed women, not counting those who drive the carts, horses, and elephants with the supplies and food. And know that they fight bravely like men. No male can stay with them over nine days, during which he can carouse and amuse himself and make them conceive. But he should not overstay, for in such a case he will die. This land is encircled by a river called Cyson that flows from the terrestrial paradise and is so wide that nobody can cross it except in big boats or ships.⁶

Know also that between this land [and the river is a country] called Piconye which is small and extends only for ten days' journey in length and seven in breadth. Men are here as small as

seven-year-old children and their horses are as small as sheep, and yet they are good Christians and willing workers. Nobody wages war on them except the birds who come each year when they have to harvest and to gather grapes. Then the king of this country equips himself to the best of his ability against the said birds and they have a dreadful carnage. Later, however, the birds return.⁷

We have in our country bowmen who from the waist up are men, but whose lower part is that of a horse. They carry in their hands bows and arrows and they can pull harder than any human being and they live on raw flesh. Some of our courtiers capture them and keep them chained and people come to see this great marvel.

There are in our land also unicorns who have in front a single horn of which there are three kinds: green, black, and white. Sometimes they kill lions. But a lion kills them in a very subtle way. When a unicorn is tired it lies down by a tree. The lion goes then behind it and when the unicorn wants to strike him with his horn, it dashes into the tree with such a force that it cannot free itself. Then the lion kills it.⁸

In another region of the wilderness there are men who used to be sixty cubits tall but who are now only twenty, and they cannot leave the desert, since it would displease God, for once they were outside, they could easily vanquish everybody.

You should also know that in our country there is a bird called phoenix which is the most beautiful in the world. In the whole universe there is but one such bird. It lives for a hundred years and then it rises toward the sky so close to the sun that its wings catch fire. Then it descends into its nest and burns itself; and yet out of

the ashes there grows a worm which at the end of a hundred days becomes again as beautiful a bird as it was ever before.⁹

In our land there is also an abundance of bread, wine, meat, and of everything that is good for the human body. Know also that no venomous creature can enter certain parts of our country.

Between us and the Saracens there flows a river called Ydonis which comes from the terrestrial paradise and is full of precious stones. It flows through our land mostly in small and big arms and many precious stones are found there, such as emeralds, sapphires, jasper, calcedonians, rubies, carbuncles, "scabasses," and many other precious stones which I have not mentioned; and of each we know its name and its magic power.

There is in our land an herb called permanent. Whoever carries it with him can conjure the devil and question him as to who he is, where he is going, what he is doing on earth, and make him speak. Because of this, the devil does not dare to stay in our land.¹⁰

Know also that in our country there grows wild pepper amidst trees and serpents. When it becomes ripe, we send our people to gather it. They put the woods on fire and everything burns, but when the fire has died out, they make great heaps of pepper and serpents and they put the pepper together and carry it later to a barn, wash it in two or three waters, and let it dry in the sun. In this way it becomes black, hard, and biting.¹¹

Near this region is a fountain and whoever drinks of its water three times on an empty stomach will have no sickness for thirty years; and when he has drunk of it, he will feel as if he has eaten the best meat and spices, for it is full of God's grace. A person who can bathe in this fountain, be he of a hundred or thousand

years, will regain the age of thirty-two. Know that we were born and blessed in the womb of our mother five hundred and sixty-two years ago and since then we have bathed in the fountain six times.¹²

Let it be known to you that the Sandy Sea originates in our country and that it has a swift surf and produces frightful waves. Nobody can cross it, no matter how one tries, except us, for we let ourselves be carried by the griffins, as Alexander did when he was about to conquer the enchanted castle.¹³ Not far from this sea there flows a river in which one finds many precious stones and herbs that are good for many medicines.

Between us and the Jews there runs a river full of precious stones and it descends so swiftly that nobody can cross it except on Saturday when it stands still; and whatever it encounters, it carries into the Sandy Sea. We have to protect this crossing, for we have on this frontier forty-two castles which are the strangest and most beautiful in the world and many men to defend them, to wit ten thousand knights, six thousand crossbowmen and fifteen thousand archers, and forty thousand troopers who guard the aforesaid passages, so that, if the great King of Israel would come with his men, he could not get across with his Jews, who are twice as numerous as the Christians, but not as the Saracens, for they hold two thirds of the world. Know that the great King of Israel has under him three hundred kings and four thousand princes, dukes, and counts, all of them Jews and obedient to him. And if the Jews could cross this passage, all the Christians and Saracens would be lost.¹⁴

On each Saturday we let some eight hundred or thousand Jews come across for the purpose of trade. They do not, however, enter

our strongholds, but exchange the wares outside, because we do not trust them. They buy exclusively with ingots of gold and silver, for they do not have real money. After they have made their purchases, they return home. Know also that we have forty-two castles which are not farther apart than a crossbow shot.

Let it be known to you, that one league from there we have a city called the Great Orionde which is the strongest and most beautiful in the world. One of our kings guards it and he collects tribute from the great King of Israel, for he owes us every year two hundred horses loaded with precious stones, gold, and silver, in addition to the expenses incurred in this city and in the aforesaid castles. Know that when we make war on them, we kill all those who happen to be in our country and because of this they do not dare to stir, or attack us. Notice that the Jewish women are the most beautiful and passionate in the world.

Know that near the Sandy River there is the Sandy Sea and nobody can cross it, except when a strong wind spreads close to the ground, then one can easily enter it. Yet a person should hurry to return, for if he tarries, he could remain in the sea. And every piece of debris that comes out of it turns into precious stones; but they cannot be sold before we have seen them, and if we wish to have them, we can buy them at prices set by our merchants.¹⁵

In another region of our land there is a mountain on which nobody can dwell because of its great heat. Certain worms who cannot live save in fire sustain themselves there. Near this mountain we keep constantly forty thousand men who maintain a great fire. And when these worms sense the heat of the fire and come out of the earth, they enter the flames and spin there a thread similar to the one made by the silkworms. Out of this thread we make gar-

ments for us and our ladies and we wear them at the great holidays of the year. Whenever we wish to wash them, we put them into fire whence they come clean and fresh.¹⁶

Know also that no Christian king has as many treasures as we do, because nobody can be poor in our country who wants to earn his living. Remember also that St. Thomas performs more miracles than all the saints of the paradise, for he preaches personally once a year in his church to everybody, and he also preaches in a palace, as you will hear.¹⁷

Let it be known to you that in another region of our country there are strange men who have human bodies, but heads of dogs. It is impossible to understand their language, yet they are good fishermen, since they can enter the deepest sea and stay there for a day without emerging. They catch as many fish as they desire, and they carry them into their subterranean houses. We, however, mark the place where they put them and take as many as we want. These men bring woe on our wild beasts, for they eat them and they fight against the archers and battle them fiercely.¹⁸

In our country there are also birds of a more hot-blooded nature than elsewhere. When the time of hatching comes, they lay twenty-one eggs on the bottom of a sea, and out of them come birds and they fly away. We catch many of them since they taste good when they are young. And if a man's or woman's health is failing and they eat of these birds, their vigor returns to them and they become as strong as before, or even stronger.¹⁹

There grows in our country also the tree of life from which the holy oil is coming. This tree is completely dry and a serpent is guarding and watching it day and night, all the year round, except on Saint John's day, when it is fast asleep, and this is the

time when we approach it. During the whole year it yields but three pounds which gather drop by drop. When we have come close to the holy oil, we take it and go back cautiously for fear that the serpent may pursue us. This tree is only a day's journey from the earthly paradise. When the serpent awakens, it becomes angry and hisses so loudly that it can be heard a day's march away. It is three times as big as a horse and it has nine heads and a pair of wings. And after we have crossed the sea, it turns around, while we proceed and take the holy oil to the Patriarch of St. Thomas and he consecrates it and anoints us Christians with it. The rest we send to the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and he in turn sends it to the Pope of Rome who blesses it and adds to it olive oil and sends it to all Christians beyond the sea.²⁰

There are no thieves in our country, neither among our citizens, nor among the foreigners, for God and St. Thomas would have confounded them, while we would have put them to death.

Let it be known to you that we have swift horses which can carry a knight in full armor for three or four days without taking food.

And whenever we go to war, we let fourteen kings, clad in garments of gold and silver, carry in front of us fourteen ensigns adorned with sundry precious stones. Other kings who come behind carry richly decorated banners of silk.

Know that in front of us there march forty thousand clerics and an equal number of knights, then come two hundred thousand men on foot, not counting the wagons with provisions or the elephants and camels which carry arms and ammunition. And when we leave for war, we entrust our country to the Patriarch of St. Thomas.²¹

Yet when we ride out in peace, we let a simple wooden cross be borne before us, so that we are reminded of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Know that at the gates of each of our cities there are three crosses made of wood for people to worship the Holy Rood.

Likewise when we ride out in peace we order a vessel full of earth to be carried as a sign that we are dust and unto dust we shall return; another vessel full of gold is borne to show that we are the most powerful and noble king.

Let it be known to you that nobody in our land dares to commit the sin of lechery, for at once he would be burned, because the sacrament of marriage has been ordained by God; nor does anybody dare to lie in our country, for he would be hanged [immediately].

You should know that each year we visit in the desert the body of St. Daniel, the prophet. On this occasion we take with us ten thousand clerics and an equal number of knights and two hundred towers built on the elephants which also carry a turret to protect us from the seven-headed dragons. Know also that in this desert there are the finest dates that grow on trees and they are tasty, green, and ripe as well in winter as in summer. The desert stretches for eighty and sixty days' journey and there live two Patriarchs of St. Thomas who sit at the table in front of us, for they have the authority of the Pope of Rome. We have also as many abbots as there are days in a year taken twice and added fifteen. Each of them comes once during the year to chant at the altar of St. Thomas. We also sing there on the annual feast days, and on account of this we are called Prester John, for we are a priest because of sacrificing at the altar, and we are a king because we are just and upright.²²

Know that I had been blessed before I was born, for God has sent an angel to my father who told him to build a palace full of God's grace and a chamber of paradise for the child to come, who was to be the greatest king on earth and to live for a long time. And whoever stays in the palace will never suffer hunger, thirst, or death. When my father had woke up from his slumber, he was overly joyful and he began to build the palace which you will see.

First of all, its walls are of crystal, the ceiling above is of precious stones and it is adorned with stars similar to those of the sky, and its floor is also of crystal. There are no windows or doors in this palace and inside it has twenty-four columns of gold and various precious stones. We stay there during the big holidays of the year and in the midst of it St. Thomas preaches to the people. And inside our palace there is [water] and the best wine on earth, and whoever drinks of it has no desire for worldly things, and nobody knows where the [water] goes or whence it comes.²³

There is still another great marvel in our palace, for no food is served in it except on a tray, grill, or trencher that hangs from a column, so that when we sit at the table and wish to eat, the food is placed before us by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Know that all the scribes on earth could not report or describe the riches of our palace and our chapel. Everything we have written to you is as true as there is God, and for nothing in the world would we lie, since God and St. Thomas would confound us and deprive us of our title.

If you desire from us something that we can fulfill, do not hesitate to ask, for we shall do it gladly. We beg you to keep in mind the holy pilgrimage, and may it take place soon, and may you be brave and of great courage, and pray, do not forget to put to death

those treacherous Templars and pagans and, please, send us an answer with the envoy who brought the presents. We entreat the King of France to greet from us all loyal Christians beyond the sea and to send us some valiant knight of noblest French blood.²⁴ We pray to our Lord to keep you in the grace of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Written in our holy palace in the year five hundred and seven since our birth.

*Here end the sundry tales of men, beasts, and birds in
the land of Prester John*

MANY A NEW AND ENTERTAINING STORY ABOUT
THE BEASTS IN PRESTER JOHN'S LAND