

Mythology and Diplomacy in the Age of Exploration

Adam Knobler

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Mythology and Diplomacy in the Age of Exploration is volume 23 of the Brill series ‘European Expansion and Indigenous Response.’ In the Foreword to this volume, George Bryan Souza (present editor of the series) states that the aim of the collection is to analyze ‘the process of European expansion, interchange and connectivity in a global context in the early modern and modern period,’ taking into account the ‘several ancillary historical processes’ produced by European expansion and encounter with the rest of the world, such as ‘colonization, imperialism, capitalism and globalization’ (ix). In this context, *Mythology and Diplomacy in the Age of Exploration* concerns medieval and early modern interaction between European and non-European worlds. Adam Knobler assumes that this interaction was influenced by medieval mythology, and especially by two well-known myths: namely the myth of the existence of Prester John’s powerful kingdom, and the myth of Saint Thomas’s preaching in the Indies.

Knobler defines myths as ‘sacred religious narrative[s] involving extraordinary events, upon which cultures base their behavior and their understanding of aspects of the world’ (1). These narratives, he states, shaped the expectations of kings, emissaries, and explorers; as such, diplomacy was molded by medieval mythologies, conditioning Europeans’ knowledge of the peoples and cultures they encountered. Consequently, European diplomatic overtures to newly discovered groups or polities were made under these pre-existing cosmographical assumptions, creating false expectations.

This book does not focus on medieval and early modern diplomatic technicalities, but on the use and influence of mythology in the history of diplomacy between Europeans and non-Europeans. Specifically, it refers to medieval and early modern diplomacy as the desire of Christians ‘to find allies “on the other side of Islam”’ (105). And the aim of this desire was to organize a Crusade to defeat the Muslims and reconquer the Holy Sepulchre.

This study covers the period from the twelfth century to the seventeenth; for Knobler, the ‘Age of Exploration’ encompasses the Iberian expansion in the Indies (between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), and European contacts with eastern kingdoms through the Middle Ages up to the seventeenth century. The book’s first

chapter introduces the myth of Prester John, which spread during the first half of the twelfth century. Prester John was believed to have been the Christian emperor of a powerful kingdom in the ‘marvelous East,’ which embodied western virtues such as strength, independence, and material wealth. Knobler discusses how, during a difficult crusading period, Prester John served as a desirable ally for the Christians against the Muslims. In this sense, all distant and unknown kingdoms soon became suitable lands in which to locate Prester John’s kingdom.

Chapter 2 analyzes European contacts and diplomatic interactions with the Turco-Mongols. As Knobler states, ‘aspects of the Prester John mythology persistently shaped Western observations and diplomatic relations with the Mongols’ (12). Before their invasion of Europe, the Mongols were hoped to be Prester John’s people. Christians’ explorations in the East, and their attempts to build an alliance with the Mongols were powered by this initial hope—and by the possibility of a Mongol conversion.

Following his analysis of European-Mongol diplomatic failures, Knobler argues that European diplomatic overtures turned towards Ethiopia, where Prester John’s reign was believed to be ‘found’ (chapter 3). Ethiopia, traditionally considered one of the first evangelized nations, was regarded as one of the best candidates for the role of Christianity’s distant ally against the Muslims. In keeping with this perspective, Europeans (especially the Portuguese) led diplomatic missions to Ethiopia. In the first half of the sixteenth century, Portuguese explorations represent for Knobler a turning point in the vicissitudes of the myth of Prester John, as do the circulation of prophecies regarding the unification of the world under Christianity. The Portuguese empire was promoted as embodying the qualities of Prester John’s kingdom, while Ethiopia was branded ‘heretic’ and a ‘minor kingdom—irrelevant for the Portuguese and their dreams of world domination’ (55).

As analyzed in chapter 4, the explorations in Africa and Asia were still conditioned by the myths of Prester John and Saint Thomas. For Knobler, the figure of Vasco da Gama is exemplary: his first voyages ‘demonstrate the preexistent Portuguese belief in the presence of Christians in the “Indies”.’ Moreover, Knobler shows how the myth of Saint Thomas’s preaching ‘influenced what he [da Gama] thought he saw in India’ (58–59). During the Portuguese explorations, many African kings, as well as Asian Christians, were identified as descendants of those to whom the apostle had preached. In the first section of this chapter, a central theme is the failure of Portuguese diplomatic attempts to establish an alliance (to reconquer Jerusalem) with these peoples.

The second part of chapter 4 and the chapter that follows are dedicated to the role that mythology played in the Iberian colonization of the New World. Knobler describes how missionaries in New Mexico and Peru manipulated the Aztec myth of

Quetzalcoatl (the ‘feathered serpent’) and the imagery of the Inkan god Viracocha (creator of all things) to explain to Mesoamerican peoples that these divinities were no other than Saint Thomas, who preached in the Americas in ancient times. Knobler explains this preaching strategy with reference to a perspective both political and religious: ‘by stating that older local deities were in fact Christian, the Spanish (in particular) could claim that the Americas were by rights Christian lands historically,’ and the Conquest ‘was simply a reclamation of lands that ... were returning to their “rightful” owners.’ Moreover, Christians rewrote and ‘Christianized’ the past and the cosmologies of Amerindians in order to place themselves ‘in the “proper order” of things’ (69).

The author also takes into account the mission to the East of Christopher Columbus, and his arrival in the New World (chapter 5). For Knobler, this ‘diplomatic’ voyage destined to reach the court of the Grand Khan represents the ‘continuation of the search for allies in Central Asia’ (70) analyzed in chapter 2. Traces of this search and crusading ideology can be found during the colonization of the New World: firstly, in Columbus’s emphasis on American gold (to finance a supposed forthcoming crusade), and, secondly, in the instructive medium of dance dramas, first documented in 1539. Created and presented under Franciscan direction, in these events, Amerindians performed as Christians and their allies in battles against the Muslims. Following a general introduction to the prophetic context of the Conquest, Knobler concludes that ‘crusade to the Holy Land was intimately linked with the development of Spanish empire in the Americas’ (76).

In chapter 6, Knobler analyzes European ‘Christianization’ of the past of non-Christian princes and peoples (the Aq Qoyunlu, the Safavids, and the Druze of Lebanon) during the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. He also presents the failed attempts of Christian diplomacy to organize with these peoples a crusade against the Ottomans. In these attempts, ‘the imagining of a Christian king “behind” Islam, established by the Prester John stories, still continued’ (82). Finally, Knobler extends the European mythological landscape by briefly taking into account the long-lasting Jewish desire for contact with distant and powerful Jewish kingdoms (chapter 7). The myth of Ten Lost Tribes of Israel played a leading role in these expectations. According to a widespread and common Jewish interpretation of this myth, the Ten Tribes were believed to be bound for Europe to save their coreligionists from their condition of subjection and diaspora.

Knobler describes how, throughout the centuries, the accounts of Jewish travelers (such as Eldad ha-Dani and Benjamin of Tudela), prophet-messiahs or pseudo-ambassadors (like David Reubeni), and authors (such as Abraham Farissol) described the kingdom of the Ten Lost Tribes, thereby reinforcing Jewish expectations about these peoples. Such accounts were the basis for Jewish attempts to establish diplomatic interactions between Christians and the kingdom of the Lost Tribes; these

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relations proved possible thanks to the Christian belief in the existence of allies in remote lands.

With a particular focus on Christian Europeans, Knobler offers a brief history of Europeans' imagination and research about non-European peoples, as well as their diplomatic contact with a variety of these 'others.' *Mythology and Diplomacy in the Age of Exploration* gives a highly readable overview of the political fallout from the myths of Prester John and Saint Thomas. The volume also provides a panoramic view of the numerous, complex themes gathered into particular myths in medieval and early modern Europeans' understanding of the 'other.'