

Origin, metamorphosis and destiny of an enigmatic Letter

Origine, metamorfosi e sorte di una Lettera misteriosa

The legend of Prester John, as everyone knows, stems from a text: the Letter attributed to him. But the author of the Letter was not the Prester, who is a fictional character: it was the Letter that generated its author, and this non-existent author has since enjoyed a long and glorious life.

The Letter of Prester John is a good example of heterogenesis of ends, and at the same time of the power of literature. Those who drafted the Letter, in the second half of the 12th century, might perhaps have imagined that it would arouse some curiosity about its purported sender. But they certainly could not foresee that their text would become a best-seller in the following centuries, nor that it would be modified, supplemented, rewritten, translated, nor that it would turn into a vehicle for ideas and fantasies, nor that it would catalyze traditions and inspire new stories, nor that it would raise legitimate questions while generating undue answers. They could not expect that the fictional character created by them would be later regarded as a champion of Christianity among the pagans, as a defeated and humiliated rival of Genghis Khan, or as an unchallenged ruler of equatorial Africa; that he would coagulate apocalyptic tensions, represent a model kingdom, propose utopian ideals. They could not foretell that crusaders would wait in vain for the Prester's arrival under the walls of Damietta, nor that missionaries, ambassadors and merchants would seek news of him far and wide through the streets of the East, nor that the most important rulers of Europe would ask him for friendship, nor that, three hundred and fifty years later, the Portuguese would claim to have discovered him and helped him defeat the Muslims. They could not know that the Prester's kingdom and his portrait would be depicted in the world maps of the late Middle Ages, thus providing with geographical and visual materiality an evanescent entity. They could not anticipate that Giovanni Boccaccio would slip Prester John into a satirical list of fanciful kings and queens¹, nor that Ludovico Ariosto would make him a desperate king damned for the sin of pride², nor that William Shakespeare would take him as a symbol of what is distant and unattainable³, nor that Umberto Eco would make his story the subject of a meta-novel⁴. Finally, they could not envision that the Letter, together with its derived myth, would have become a place for the exchange, the communication and the comparison of cultural, anthropological and folkloric themes of the most diverse origin.

Few other literary works have enjoyed such a surprising and fortunate fate - assuming that one can speak of a literary work, for a text which is so stylistically poor, even mean. Obviously, the Letter fulfilled deep-seated interests of the societies it traversed, and was able to renew and adapt itself over time, developing in order to be always topical. Nevertheless, a starting point does exist; in a historical view, this point is the basis of any further analysis. Let us summarize briefly what is known about the origin of the Letter. Its oldest versions were composed in Latin (the idea of a Greek model, although never definitively discarded, has got few supporters)⁵; the earliest manuscripts were written within the 12th century, but are often difficult to date, because the text is copied mostly as an addition to pre-existing codices⁶. The purported addressee, Manuel Comnenus, was the emperor of Byzantium between 1141, a sure term *ante quem non*, and 1180, a likely term *ante quem* because it makes little sense to address a fictitious letter to a ruler who is no longer alive. More

¹ *Decameron*, VIII 9.

² *Orlando Furioso*, XXXIII 102 sgg.

³ *Much Ado about Nothing*, II 1.

⁴ *Baudolino*, 1^a ed., Bompiani, Milano 2000.

⁵ This assumption was advanced by F. Zarncke, *Der Priester Johannes*, I, in *Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Classe der Königl. Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften*, Bd. VII, n. 8, Leipzig 1879, pp. 830-1028 [repr. Olms, Hildesheim - New York 1980]: 876-877; further bibliography in B. Wagner, *Die «Epistola presbiteri Johannis»: lateinisch und deutsch. Überlieferung, Textgeschichte, Rezeption und Übertragungen im Mittelalter. Mit bisher unedierte Texten*, Niemeyer, Tübingen 2000, pp. 244-5.

⁶ The fundamental study on the manuscript tradition is that by Wagner, *Die «Epistola presbiteri Johannis»* cit.

precise determinations are haphazard. Alberic of the Three Fountains, a Cistercian who wrote around 1235-1240, claims that the Letter would have been written in 1165⁷; but his testimony is rather late and can be considered only with suspicion. A much-discussed letter that Pope Alexander III addresses to some *Iohannes illustris magnificus rex Indiae*, written on September 27th of a year that is supposed to be 1177, suggests that, at that time, the papal curia believed in the existence of a wealthy Christian ruler called *Iohannes*, even if a pope could hardly have qualified him as Prester because of a self-proclaimed ordination⁸. But this document is not free from doubt; moreover, it does not contain any certain reference to the Letter.

The image of the Latin Letter that we have today is still the one provided by the 'classic' reference edition, published in 1879 by the great philologist Friedrich Zarncke⁹. In the cultural climate of the German scientific positivism, Zarncke attempted to identify the possible historical roots of the legend, presenting the documents that might constitute its antecedents: the arrival in Rome of a self-styled *archiepiscopus Indiae* at the time of Pope Calixtus II (1122); and Otto of Freising's account of a Nestorian *rex et sacerdos* called *Presbiter Iohannes*, victorious over the Muslims and ready to march on Jerusalem (on which the Syrian bishop Hugh of Jabala is reported to have informed Pope Eugenius III in about 1145). At least in the second instance, the connection is highly probable, given the identical inconsistency regarding the name of the character (both Otto and the Letter call him *Presbiter Iohannes*, as if the term *Presbiter* were part of his name, and not *Iohannes presbiter*, the normal construction if *presbiter* simply represented a role). But by Zarncke's time it was unclear through what passages and by whose initiative the mysterious oriental king evoked by Hugh of Jabala became the fictitious writer of the Letter; and it is still unclear today.

Zarncke published his edition after an extensive survey of the manuscript tradition – the most extensive possible at the time. According to his opinion, the Latin text was the basis for every vernacular form, an assumption shared by the following scholars. He recorded about one hundred Latin codices and collated about twenty of them. According to Zarncke, the transmission of the Latin text responded to an 'incremental' pattern: the original version (called *U*, an acronym that stood for *Uninterpolirter Text*) later embodied successive expansions (or interpolations), each of them involving a progressive growth of material. Zarncke identified five versions expanded with respect to *U*, and identified them by the alphabetical letters from *A* - the oldest and less developed - to *E* - the most recent, in which the Letter had grown up to about three times its initial extent. His edition tried to render even visually this increase, via the implementation of special typographical solutions; for the time, an impressive and convincing pioneering experiment. In the 20th century, instead, scholars have mainly investigated the vernacular versions, thus completing some early studies of Zarncke; as for the Latin text - the only one to have enjoyed an international circulation in its various versions, - the general framework proposed by Zarncke has been substantially accepted. Only in 2000 another German philologist, Bettina Wagner, carried out a thorough reexamination of the entire tradition, providing more solid philological foundations for any further study¹⁰. In spite of a considerable increase of the known manuscripts - for the Latin text alone the number of the codices now amounts to over 200 -, Wagner considers many of Zarncke's basic acquisitions about *U* to be valid, and does not replace the critical text provided by him; nevertheless, she makes significant changes to the relationship between the interpolations subsequent to *U* (two of which lose significance), stresses the importance of two ancient manuscripts (*Re*, *Ro*)¹¹ that convey a shorter text than the Vulgate one, and publishes several secondary or derived versions previously unknown or neglected.

⁷ *Chronica Alberici monachi Trium Fontium, a monacho novi monasterii Hoiensis interpolata*, ed. P. Scheffer-Boichorst, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores*, XXIII, Hahn, Hannover 1874, pp. 631-950: 848-9.

⁸ Edited by Zarncke, *Der Priester Johannes*, I, cit., pp. 941-944. See A. Klopprogge, *Ursprung und Ausprägung des abendländischen Mongolenbildes im 13. Jahrhundert. Ein Versuch zur Ideengeschichte des Mittelalters*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1993, pp. 97-100; M. Uebel, *Ecstatic Transformations. On the Uses of Alterity in the Middle Ages*, Palgrave-MacMillan, Basingstoke 2005, pp. 133-136.

⁹ Zarncke, *Der Priester Johannes*, I, cit.

¹⁰ Wagner, *Die «Epistola presbiteri Johannis»* cit.

¹¹ Respectively: Reims, Bibliothèque municipale, 142; Rouen, Bibliothèque municipale, 1343. We quote the manuscripts with the acronym proposed by Wagner, *Die «Epistola presbiteri Johannis»* cit.

The soundness of the 'incremental' model proposed by Zarncke, and improved by Wagner with the necessary criticism and clarification, has been confirmed by researches conducted in recent years, which have brought to light new evidence about the formative stage of the Letter¹². We have now reason to think that the alleged *Uninterpolirter Text* published by Zarncke is not the first draft of the text, but rather a secondary text itself, which was preceded by a short, but complex gestation. Its construction seems to have taken place through different stages and perhaps by means of the work of different subjects. The evident contrast in style and content between the two parts of the Letter – a genuinely epistolary first part, in which the Prester addresses the emperor of Byzantium in a haughty tone; and a descriptive second part, where the features and the *mirabilia* of the kingdom are listed, while the initial epistolary fiction is almost completely forgotten – could be explained as the inaccurate outcome of a progressive composition. At the very first, only a simple and short letter is assumed to have been written: perhaps a satirical piece against the Byzantine, perhaps a play born in a diplomatic milieu. Then, someone added to this letter a series of *mirabilia* and information concerning lands vaguely located in Orient, a kind of scattered bullet-point list. At this time, many of the elements that would later give fame to the Letter were not included yet: there was no description of the palace, no mention of the twelve tribes of Israel nor of Gog and Magog, no mention of the sacred office of the Prester, nor of his supremacy over ecclesiastical dignities, and of the whole menagerie of exotic animals there was barely a mention of the elephant... These celebrated items were added at a later stage and formed a text (a little) better structured and (pretty much) enriched: this is Zarncke's *U*-version, which we shall continue to call by this customary acronym, even though it can no longer be regarded as the original and *uninterpolirter* text. The *U*-form of the Letter began to circulate and gained popularity; but in parallel it continued to be modified, in a crescendo of vitality that demonstrates how great an interest it aroused in the readers of the time. Within a century, the Letter had already been expanded several times in Latin, duplicating and tripling the palaces, enriching the lists of fantastic animals and miraculous stones, creating new provinces and new magics; it was translated into French, Catalan, Occitan, several German dialects, Italian, Hebrew, and from French again backwards into Latin; had been turned into new, more fictional and imaginative versions; had been the subject of poems and versifications. At the same time the legend spread out: despite the skeptics – a fifteenth-century copyist titled the Letter as *Liber incredibilis*¹³ –, everybody liked to believe in the existence of Prester John, with the enchanted, just and virtuous world he spoke of.

The rediscovered prehistory of the Letter, as well as the successive stratifications that have been recently established, must be taken into account in the general interpretation of the text, even more than it has been done so far. The long and complex diachrony of the Letter does not prevent from a transversal and global reading of it, intersecting the different items accumulated in the progressive reworkings; but such intersections must be understood as moments of fruition, born as a crystallization within a particular context, which may also be very distant from the intentions of the primitive drafters. Just like the Prester John, as a character, had a vitality of its own and unpredictably became quite different from what its creators had planned, so the text of the letter went through an individual process of development and interpretation. This process involved addition, renewal and modification of many different items. In turn, these items can be considered as a whole, because of the picture – or pictures – that they have contributed to form after having been blended together; but with the awareness of the different genesis of each.

To facilitate this task, we propose here a synopsis of the progressive growth of the text in the main Latin forms of the Letter; notwithstanding their great creative variety, all the vernacular versions derive directly or indirectly from these Latin forms. As mentioned above, according to our reconstruction the earliest form of the text is the mere 'epistolary section' (corresponding to the first 7 paragraphs in Zarncke's edition), preserved as such in only two manuscripts (*M13*, *W10*)¹⁴; this form underwent a first expansion with the juxtaposition of a list of *mirabilia*, attested in connection with the 'epistolary section' in two other

¹² P. Chiesa, *Un Prete Gianni senza l'India? Un'ipotesi genetica sull'Epistola*, in "Mittelateinisches Jahrbuch" 57 (2022), pp. 76-115.

¹³ In the manuscript *Pad* (Paderborn, Erzbischöfliche Akademische Bibliothek, B^a 11); reported by Wagner, *Die «Epistola presbiteri Johannis»*, p. 88.

¹⁴ Respectively: München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 19411, and Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, 1490.

manuscripts (*Re*, *Ro*). From this version, a stable form corresponding to Zarncke's *U*-version arose, which underwent further progressive enlargements leading to the later versions *B*, *C*, *E*¹⁵. Therefore, we have distinguished in two different charts the 'epistolary section,' attested in the entire tradition, including manuscripts *M13* and *W10*, and the *mirabilia*, not contained by these two codices. The charts attempt to represent the diachronic development of the text from the oldest to the newest forms, arranged from left to right¹⁶. We have highlighted in bold the first occurrence of each narrative or descriptive item, as well as any changes to each item in a subsequent version of the text; the cells that encompass multiple successive versions (i.e. columns) indicate that in the development between them the considered section of the text was not changed¹⁷.

A) THE EPISTOLARY SECTION

	MSS. M13/W10	MSS. Ro/RE	U	B	C	E
1-7	epistle to Emanuel of Byzantium, as an invitation to submission	prologue to Emanuel of Byzantium, as an exchange of gifts	prologue to Emanuel of Byzantium, as an exchange of gifts (implemented)			
8			memento on the mortal condition			
9			connection with the <i>mirabilia</i>			

B) THE MIRABILIA

	MSS. Ro/RE	U	B	C	E
9.13	extent of the kingdom: 7 kings and 70 provinces, few Christians	extent of the kingdom: 72 kings and 72 provinces , few Christians			
10	devotion of the <i>Presbiter</i> and defense of the poor	devotion of the <i>Presbiter</i> and defense of the poor + almsgiving			
11	intention to visit the tomb of Christ	intention to visit the tomb of Christ + with a strong army			
12	regions of the kingdom: India, Babylon	regions of the kingdom: India, Babylon + Saint Thomas's tomb			
14	elephants	list of fantastic animals and men (about thirty items; the first is: elephants)			
14a-d					wild boars, wild dogs, bearded women hunting and raising wild beasts
14e-h					giant ants mining for gold, later stolen by local people
15-20				anthropophagi, people of the Antichrist	

¹⁵ We have not included versions named *A* and *D* by Zarncke, whose existence is called into doubt by Wagner.

¹⁶ The numerical reference in the first column recalls the paragraphs as marked by Zarncke (not always linear, due to his aim to synchronically represent successive editorial stages).

¹⁷ Obviously, we do not consider microtextual variants, which are constantly present in every copy of the text.

21		milk and honey; in the land of the <i>Presbiter</i> there are no poisons	
22	the river of paradise, rich in gemstones	the river of paradise, rich in gemstones (more extensive list of stones)	
23	the herb that drives away spirits		
24-26	pepper growth and harvesting	pepper growth and harvesting (longer version)	pepper growth and harvesting (longer version) + therapeutic use of pepper.
27-28		the miraculous spring that gives health and youth	
29-30	gemstone that protects sight	gemstone that protects sight + makes men invisible, causes harmony, drives away the evil eye	
30.1-5			the island of manna, of peace, where a fountain of youth springs and the dead do not rot
30.6-7a			the cave of dragons and the men who tame them
31		the sea of sand	
32-33		the river of stone	
34-37			the stone pool that heals only Christians
38-40		the underground river rich in gemstones, recovered by boys trained in the water	
41		ten tribes of Jews tributary to the <i>Presbiter</i>	
42-43		salamanders, which produce textile fiber	
44	<i>Presbiter's</i> wealth: gold, silver, elephants, camels, dromedaries	Presbiter's wealth: gold, silver, elephants, camels, dromedaries + gemstones, dogs	
45-46		moral excellence of the kingdom: hospitality, wealth, harmony, absence of vices	
46	few and worthless horses		many and fast horses
46	primacy in wealth and power		
46.8-14			stones that produce heat, cold, warmth, light, darkness
46.15-20			stones that turn water into milk and wine, that attract fish and land animals, that produce fire
47-48		royal procession: in war, preceded by golden crosses; in peace, preceded by a simple wooden cross	
48-49		the gold vase filled with earth, and the silver vase filled with gold, symbols of mortality and power	

50		primacy in wealth
51-52		excellence in virtue: absence of lying and adultery
53	annual visit to the tomb of the prophet Daniel	annual visit to the tomb of the prophet Daniel, and all go around armed against snakes ¹⁸
53	all go around armed against snakes	
65	Presbiter's banquet (once a day) ¹⁹	(-)
54	the fish from whose blood purple is made	
55	Presbiter's fortresses; his dominion over deformed ²⁰ and fearful peoples	Presbiter's fortresses; his dominion over deformed and strong peoples + his dominion over the Amazons and the Brahmins
55k-s		life and customs of the Amazons; magic animals of their land
55t-u		life and customs of the Brahmins
56		the palace: its model is the palace of Gundophorus
57-60		the palace: structure and materials
61-64		the palace: the bedroom, the balms and the women
65-66		the palace: Presbiter's banquet (once a day) ²¹ ; materials of the table; the guests
66v-z 66.2 1-29		Presbiter's mills and their complex mechanisms
67-72		the palace: the magic mirror, the structure which supports it, and the staircase to access it
73-75		court dignitaries: kings, nobles, bishops and abbots
76-78		[in B after par. 100] ²² the second palace: the dream of Quasideus

¹⁸ In the manuscripts *Re Ro* the two items are juxtaposed without connection to each other: going around armed because of the danger of snakes seems to be a general behavior, not related to the visit to Daniel's tomb. In the version *U*, as well as in the later ones derived from it, the two items are connected by a copulative *et*, which delimits the condition of going armed to the moment of the visit to the tomb.

¹⁹ Manuscripts *Re* and *Ro* present two different readings in this passage: *omni die semel comedit Re : omni die simul comedunt Ro*. In *U* the passage is incorporated into the description of the palace (par. 65), in the form *semel in die comedit curia nostra*, which traces *Re*.

²⁰ The adjective *diversiformes*, accepted by Zarncke in his edition, occurs only in the manuscript *L12* (London, British Library, Harl. 3099), considered by Zarncke as preferential, and in two *codices recentiores* (*Kre*: Kremsmünster, Stiftsbibliothek, 253; *Zü*: Zürich, Zentralbibliothek, C 101), both textually close to *L12*. The rest of the ancient tradition, included *Re Ro*, report *deformes*, and this word is supposed to be the original. The variant *diversiformes* is likely to have been generated by a copyist in the face of an awkward term, at least for those who would see in the realm of the Presbiter an ideal and heavenly place.

²¹ See above, note 19.

²² Paragraphs 76-78, 85, 87-93, 96 (according to the numeration of Zarncke), absent in *U*, include the description of a second palace; in *B* these paragraphs are placed at the end of the *Epistola*. The most likely hypothesis is that this description was a final addition in *B*, and the later *C* moved it an earlier point, immediately after the description of the first palace, to achieve better structural coherence. In this section, version *C* added other details, and version *E* also the description of a third palace.

79-84			the second palace: the fountain of youth
84.30-35			Porus's stone and the tree with a magic apple
85		[in <i>B</i> after par. 100]	the second palace: awakening of <i>Quasideus</i>
86			the second palace: confirmation of the dream
87-93		[in <i>B</i> after par. 100]	the second palace: construction and structure
94			the second palace: the magic doors
95			the second palace: the fountain that nourishes
96		[in <i>B</i> after par. 100]	the second palace: entrance of the <i>Presbiter</i>
96aa-hh			the chapel that grows and descends; the eunuch chaplains; the sacred vestments
96k-k-pp			the gum tree and its allegorical significance
96q-q-vv			the third palace, formerly the palace of Porus: precious materials, automata, birds
96.36-41			food and drink for <i>Presbiter</i> ; their preparation
97-98		oxymoron explanation: why such a powerful man calls himself <i>Presbiter</i>	
99			epistolary epilogue
99	kingdom extent: three months wide, length is unknown	kingdom extent: four months wide, length is unknown	
100		infinity of <i>Presbiter</i> 's domain: like the stars of the sky and the sand of the sea	
76-78		the second palace: the dream of <i>Quasideus</i>	[in <i>C-E</i> after par. 75]
85		the second palace: awakening of <i>Quasideus</i>	[in <i>C-E</i> after par. 75]
87-93		the second palace: construction and structure	[in <i>C-E</i> after par. 75]
96		the second palace: entrance of the <i>Presbiter</i>	[in <i>C-E</i> after par. 75]
100xx.42			protocol elements (date / <i>confirmatio</i> / <i>subscriptio</i>)

When considering the entire tradition, the variants are actually much more numerous than those that appear in our chart. The scheme we have presented concerns only the basic Latin versions and the period of formation of the text, within the 14th century; but in the meantime, the Letter had already been translated into several vernacular languages, and had become one of the most prominent bestsellers of medieval literature. At every step, even in each individual copy, different details were produced, according to an 'open text' *mouvance* typical of the works of this genre. A complete comparative and evolutionary picture including all of the existing versions, Latin and vernacular, could hardly be drawn, because of the exceptional mutability of the text²³. As it is often the case, what at the one end appears to us a thorny philological problem - the difficulty of categorizing, regimenting, and modeling the evolution of a text – on the other hand is a consequence of the irrepressible vitality of the text, that is, of the passion it aroused in the readers and listeners of the time.

²³ Important experiments in composing overall pictures are provided by Wagner, *Die «Epistola presbiteri Johannis»* cit, pp. 219-34 (for Latin versions), 472-85 (for German versions).