

## Alexander the Great, Prester John, Strabo of Amasia, and Wonders of the East

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**I-Chun Wang,**  
**"Alexander the Great, Prester John, Strabo of Amasia, and Wonders of the East"**  
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**Abstract:** In her article "Alexander the Great, Prester John, Strabo of Amasia, and Wonders of the East" I-Chun Wang analyses the wonders referred to the realm of Prester John and the imagination of India as exemplified in the pseudo-letter of Alexander the Great. The pseudo letters attributed to Prester John and Alexander demonstrate imagination and identity construction. Throughout history, *terra incognita* suggested a longing to discover new lands and utopia. Cathay, India, Timbuktu, and El Dorado have drawn the imagination of Westerners in different periods are represented in legends, folktales, literary texts, and travel and pseudo-travel texts. Including the said pseudo-letters, Wang explores several texts about the East as imagined by the western world of the late medieval and early modern periods.

## I-Chun WANG

### Alexander the Great, Prester John, Strabo of Amasia, and Wonders of the East

In the medieval and pre-modern West, *terra incognita* signified a longing to discover new lands and utopia: Cathay, India, Timbuktu, El Dorado, etc., have drawn the imagination of Westerners and imagined lands are represented in legends, folktales, literary texts, travel literature, imaginary travelogues, and pseudo-historical writings. The earliest such description is by Herodotus (Wittkower 159) and Strabo of Amasia, the first-century geographer, with his account of Hindustan (Jackson 1). The aim of Herodotus's account was to explore and analyze the relationship between Greeks and non-Greeks. The most notable travel accounts of travels to the East during the medieval period were made by Sir John Mandeville who fictionalized his accounts about his experience of serving the emperor of China, Marco Polo (1254-1324), who wrote about his travel to the capital city of Kublai Khan in China, and Ibn Battuta (1304-1377) who traveled to the Arabian Peninsula, Somalia, the Swahili coast, Anatolia, and even China. Other medieval European travel writings about the East include Benjamin of Tudela about his travels to Persia and the border regions of China, Ramon Lull's *Libre de Fine* about the routes to the East, Friar William of Rubruck who traveled to Constantinople and to the Court of the Great Khan of Mongol from 1253 to 1255, and Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo's account to the court of Timour. As Friar Jordanus in the fourteenth century described in his *The Wonders of the East (Mirabilia Descripta)*, the world of the East could be referred to India, Cathay, and the unknown land that stretched across the realm of the Turks (iv-v).

Karen Ni Mheallaigh reminds us that "pseudo-documentation" or the making-up of sources, inscriptions, archaeologies, etc., is a conscious strategy in medieval and pre-modern writing (419-24) and that it is interesting that even after the seventeenth century some writers chose to believe they should "turn to the East to recover the lost hierarchy" and thus "the eastern Paradise" became a prominent perspective (see Manning 286). In the middle ages India was perceived as a place where Christian teachings by Saint Thomas took hold and that, further East, an Assyrian Patriarch stayed in the "kingdom of Oponia," meaning Japan (see Manning 286). With regard to medieval Europe, Susan Kim and Asa Simon Mittman discuss representations of the East in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and point out that in the descriptions there are often lists of "wonders, marvelous people, creatures and things" and that writers were not trying to indicate the difference of here and there (1). Nicholas Howe suggests that such writers envision the possibility of assimilation and that thus the surrogate traveler or the reader might share the ideology of the person who represents the foreign phenomenon (155-57).

Medieval and early modern travel texts were often exemplified by "witness" accounts. Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, and other travelers claimed to have eye-witnessed the foreign countries they visited. They reported the wealth of big cities, ethnographical findings, and notable things they observed. For example, Edward Webbe (?1554-) — a soldier, galley slave, and traveler — explored the powers of Tartarica and Persia and in his *The Rare & most wonderful thinges* (?1590), he described his adventures, narrating what he witnessed and heard about the lands he visited, such as Constantinople, Jerusalem, Goa in India, and other places. What makes Webbe's text extraordinary is his mention of the lost kingdom of Prester John, a legendary medieval Christian king, the ruler of the realm beyond the Persian mountains and whose lands stretched across India reaching the border of Cathay (27-35). Further, Webbe described Prester John's realm in Tartarica (27-35) and the realm ruled by the Mongolian conqueror Yeh-Iti Ta-shih, founder of the Central Asian empire of Qara-Khitay (see Prawdin 123). Although Jordanus de Severac in the fourteenth century referred the realm of Prester John as located in Ethiopia (42), Webbe related it to the land beyond Damascus while Don Pedro of Portugal placed the mythical land in the Indies (see Nowell 435).

As James S. Romm notes, starting from Ptolemy's *Geography*, many narratives about India relate creatures in India with unexpected forms. For example, Ctesias of Cnidus, a Greek physician in fifth century BC, wrote about nineteen wonders about animals and plants, another sixteen are related to streams, rivers and minerals, seven races and six climatic phenomena (see Farr). Similarly, in the pseudo-letter of Alexander to Aristotle, besides the description of the wonders it describes when

Alexander himself wanted to know what was beyond the ocean and the local inhabitants told him that the sea was too dark for any man to travel by ship (Orchard, "The Letter" 243). To understand the "extremities of the earth" (Romm 12), people of antiquity understood the seas and big rivers as boundaries of land; hence the Greek worldview developed a concept that the seas should be the rim and mariners should be aware not proceed any further. Thus, in the Greek concept of space the boundary of the human condition represented by the ocean signaled danger and disorder: the expansion of territory was equivalent to recognizing the danger and gathering related information so as to trade, conquer, and exploit the resources of the designated space (see Romm 12-18). Further, Lesley B. Cormack discusses three trends of medieval and early modern geography: the mathematical geography of Ptolemy, descriptive geography, and chorography. Mathematical geography aided by geodesy facilitates administration suitable for navigators and governmental officials. Descriptive geography portrays political and physical space of other lands, while chorography, combined with the tradition of the medieval chronicle developed the study of local topography (Cormack 38).

Claude Nicolet emphasizes that early knowledge of geography tends to be represented in journey writings and that the knowledge involved can be "intuitive, deductive, mythical or rational, practical or theoretical ... like all sciences, moves cumulatively" in witness accounts (3). Nicolet's concern is the space and the frontier between the known and the unknown and that fundamental knowledge includes the inhabited or inhabitable earth. Nevertheless, this way of representation not only provides an imaginary and assumptive sketch about space, landscape, and culture, but also serves as an assessment of the physical world per se. The formation of the concept of space took a long time and not until the Renaissance did people start to analyze the use of perspectives and mathematical skills to map the world and when cartographers learned to mark *terra incognita* with icons of mythic personalities. By means of juxtaposition, the differentiation between the home and the foreign, the wild and the domesticated became a strategy to know the position and location of the self. The unmanageable ocean is Alexander's limit and his militarism encountered a mass of land he was not able to conquer: Alexander and his troops stayed in India no more than a few months before he returned to Babylon where he died (see McCrindle 3). P.M. Fraser contends that Alexander's expedition was accompanied by a group of specialists such as bematists and land-surveyors "whose task was to measure the routes taken and the distance covered by the armies" (78). However, relevant is that Alexander's pseudo-letter to Aristotle demonstrates the geopolitical concerns of the military campaign and that thus the text is about political, cultural, as well space matters.

In the following, I discuss several texts including Alexander's pseudo-letter to Aristotle (see Helleiner; McFadden; Orchard), letters by the imaginary Prester John (see Beckingham; Uebel, "Imperial"; Russell; Zarncke), and letters by Strabo of Amasia (see Dueck). Although Alexander remains a controversial figure of history, his expedition to conquer Persia provided him a chance to witness Oriental luxury (Hamilton 8-10) and his invasion of India left a strong impact upon the later descriptions of the Eastern world. An explorer, seeker of marvels, and a ruthless and efficient conqueror, Alexander is credited as a founder of cities and who facilitated trade relations and opened routes to the East (see Fraser; Pearson). The descriptions of India in the pseudo-letter by Alexander start with the royal city of Porus. After mentioning the conquest of the city, the narrator describes the multitude of Porus's troops, his palace and royal quarters: "There were golden columns, very great, and mighty and firm ... The walls were also golden, sheathed with gold plates the thickness of a finger ... I saw a golden vineyard, mighty and firm, and its branches hung about the columns ... The leaves of the vineyard were of gold, and its tendrils and fruits were of crystal and emerald, and jewels hung among the crystal" (Orchard, "The Letter" , 229).

According to Albert Brian Bosworth, King Porus's territory in the Punjab was smaller than Alexander's Macedonia but the battle was exaggerated by referring to how the powerful king in India surrendered his three hundred populous cities and how Alexander showed his magnificence by treating the captured Porus in a regal style. In history, Porus was a brave king who chose to confront the professional army of Alexander's and that of Taxila, a former vassal of Alexander (see Bosworth 9). Alexander established a new order, constructed himself as Persia's conqueror, but it was said the war between Alexander and Porus eventually devastated Alexander's troops because of Porus's fierce elephant corps (see Curtius Rufus 190-97), while the letter of Alexander to Aristotle describes more

about wild beasts and the mystic revelation of Alexander's fate and impending death. It is worth noting that Alexander, as the letter reveals, came to be interested in the interior of India wishing to travel the dangerous paths and ways than the safe paths, so he could have caught up with Porus before the defeated Indian king could escape into deserted places (for letter translation, see Orchard 229, 253).

The writer of the pseudo-letter describes the tough campaign Alexander and his troops had to undertake to conquer the exotic land of humidity. There are also vivid descriptions of how they encountered in the inner realm of India horrible water monsters, horned serpents, and beasts with pegs named *quasi caput iuna*, meaning crocodiles who slew his soldiers (Orchard, "The Letter" 243). Thus, the pseudo-letter to Aristotle is almost like an adventure story and the mythic elements represented in Alexander's adventure include the oracle trees in India and the way Indians worshipped gods (see McFadden). Both of these features signify the incomprehensibility of the land and its customs. Brian McFadden notes that although India was perceived as a wealthy kingdom, the pseudo-letter of Alexander demonstrates the sentiment of resistance via his description of the wild beasts, serpents, and classical divinities. Eventually, Alexander was forced to realize that he was "incapable of containing divine power and the vast realm in the natural world of India" (McFadden 91). In antiquity, Monsoon helped Rome trade with India (Thorley 21-36) and the maritime route represented through geographical writings tends to become a part of the imagination of a different culture or imperial desire.

The narrative in Alexander's letter suggests also the concept of mapping and the geographical problems Alexander encountered. The most significant message represented in the letter is that Alexander was motivated to see and to travel to far and unknown lands not only as a conqueror, but also as a traveler interested in foreign lands. Further, Alexander was represented as a kind conqueror who respected the heterogeneous culture of the East: "King Alexander the Great being fired with a desire to know the natures of animals and having delegated the pursuit of this study to Aristotle as a man of supreme eminence in every branch of science, orders were given to some thousands of persons throughout the whole of Asia and Greece ... to obey his instructions, so that he might not fail to be informed about any creature anywhere. His enquiries addressed to those persons resulted in the composition of his famous works on zoology" (Pliny Vol.3, 46).

J.R. Hamilton's theory about the letter of Prester John is that it was by Rainald of Dassel, Archbishop of Cologne, who was commissioned to write the letter and thus it became a successful propaganda for Christianity (Phillips 192). Another hypothesis about the existence of the realm of Prester John was raised by Constantine Marinescu who claims that Ethiopia could have been the location of the real (see also Nowell 437; Phillips). Charles Nowell tends to hold the theory that the term "India" was applied as much to Eastern Africa as to any part of far Asia because the futility of the search caused many people to perceive the story of Prester John to be allegorical (439). Thus, the search for an imaginary kingdom parallels the attempt to discover material resources. For example, Dom Henrique's search for Prester John results in the development of knowledge about navigation (see Russell 401).

Explorations of the realm of Prester John in the following centuries were with reference to the said letter and were circulated widely in medieval Europe (see Helleiner; Orchard, "The Letter"). The letter — in the name of Prester John — represented India as welcoming visitors from foreign countries. Interestingly, the medieval imagination of the Eastern world of Prester John parallels the imagination of India in Alexander's to Aristotle I discuss above: in both texts the realms in the East are represented as geographical and ethnographical wonders. The pseudo-letter of Prester John exemplifies one of the earliest works of Christian propaganda and it is based on an apocryphal document "Report on King David" circulating in Europe in the twelfth century (see Marshall 125). The letter — prophesying the arrival of Prester John in the Holy Land — may have brought forth later various versions which describe the geography and invited visitors from the West to Prester John's abundant realm (See Ullendorff and Beckingham 2-5). What is relevant here is that the writing of geography involves politics: imperial geographical exploration connotes knowledge about nature and the physical realm while the representation of the mythical lands in many cases involves the understanding of one state's prospects in relation to others' and written material inspires future

explorations. The representation of other lands may suggest a confirmation of ethno-cultural homogeneity or a record of diffused territories to be decoded. The most important aspect of exploration, however, is the sense of self and self-awareness and through this sense an imagined system is constructed. John Hale, for example, refers the development of a concrete image of Europe to cartographic knowledge and the perception of space (14-27) and John A. Agnew confirms that problems and politics are defined in geographical scales such as the domestic, national, foreign, and international (3-10). Following Hale's and Agnew's suggestions, I postulate that the legend of Prester John manifests the political perspective in and of cultural geography.

Friedrich Zarncke claimed in 1883 that there were more than one hundred manuscripts of the letter of Prester John throughout the world, because it has been translated, copied, and reproduced in different languages (21). Zarncke even found the content of the letter as appearing around 1500 resemble the most popular version dated to 1165. The replies to the letters of Prester John were found as early as the thirteenth century when Pope Alexander III (1159-1181) decided to form an army with Prester John and he confided his conciliatory letter to his envoy, Master Phillip, to deliver it in person (see Baring-Gould 48). Books in the medieval period mentioning Prester John include *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (see 23, 157-61), *Travels of Marco Polo* (see 121-48), *Le Canarien*, and the *Libro del conocimiento de todos los reinos* (The Book of Knowledge of All Kingdoms, see 61-65), etc. Giovanni da Carignano was one of the earliest locating Prester John in Africa (Beckingham 274). However, Francisco Alvarez, under the command of Monael I (King Don Emanuel 1469-1521), launched his journey to India (see Rogers 114). Although Zarncke took the legend of Prester John as a signal for the revival of Christianity, the letter of Prester John "sent to Emanuel of Constantinople" falls into the genre of utopia (see Kim 1). The letter not only shares the content of the letter of Alexander to Aristotle in describing exotic animals, crystals, and gems in India, but also carries a political function. The pseudo-letter of Alexander to Aristotle informs his teacher, among others, of the news that he had overcome King Darius of Persia at the river Gande and describes the exotic land of India. In turn, the letter of Prester John — by promoting communication with the Western world and welcoming people to note the wealth of the land in India — provides geographical imagination about the world of the East.

In another version of "The Letter of Prester John Sent to Emanuel of Constantinople" to Byzantine emperor Emanuel Commemnos issued in the middle ages (see Ross 174), the writer claims to be servant of Jesus Christ, an emperor of wealth and power, and a ruler who has seventy tributary nations and "reigns supreme, surpasses in virtue, riches and power all creatures under heaven" and hence he invites visitors and welcomes the exchange of goods with Emmanuel promising that every visitor would return home from his kingdom "laden with treasures" (Ross 175). The author of the letter confirms that there are no poor people or liars in his kingdom and that strangers and wayfarers are treated equal. According to the description of the letter, the land of Prester John is within Greater India — of the shrine of Apostle of Saint Thomas located near Babylon — and a province in the north with abundant food and the central area where John Pester lives in has rare animals like elephants, bulls with horns, birds that can be reborn from ashes, and there are people who enjoy long lives (see Beckingham 177). The fertile land provides a paradise for Christians, Jews, Amazons, and Brahmins. By means of referring Greater India to Saint Thomas, twelve archbishops supporting the imperial court include that of Samarkand and thus the land of Prester John seemingly becomes one that could easily be united with the forces from the West. With the appeal to truth and the emphasis on humanity in this "united kingdom" under Christianity, the letter not only stresses the realm and the missions of Christians via Saint Thomas — who died in India — but reinforces the geopolitical recognition of reconstructing Christians' morale after the failure of the 2nd Crusade (1145-1147) (see Uebel, "The Pathogeesis" 55). However, as Helleiner notes, the location of India is ambiguous: it might be applied to South and East Asia, Indo-China, and even to Abyssinia (see Uebel, "The Pathogeesis" 50). However, no matter where it is, India was "signified" as a land of Eastern Christians.

Interestingly, the letter to Commemnos mentions the banners and size of the army and the one to the French king describes the garments of kings, knights, clerks, as well as of common people; the unbelievers are described beaten by lightning and scorched by fire. The military force mentioned in the letter includes ten thousand mounted troops, hundred thousand infantry, forty thousand knights,

and two hundred thousand men on foot and the bureaucracy has forty thousand clerics. Although the description of precious stones and beasts in the letter falls into the writings of bestiaries and lapidaries, it is with geographical and political concerns. With territorial and geographical descriptions, positioning the identities and the acclamation of subjectivities are the main concerns of the letter and indicates the extents of Prester John's dominions.

The letter by Strabo not only compares territorial expansion of Augustus and that of Alexander, but also notes that the Macedonians had the habit of renaming cities, rivers, and other prominent features of their kingdom, although they sometimes misnamed places (see Dueck, *Strabo* 518; see also Fraser 87). Probably because Strabo was born in Pontus, a place colonized by the Greeks, he developed his interests in traveling and geography, especially the boundaries of the *oikoumene* (inhabited earth) and the extension of empire. Strabo's observation of Augustus and Alexander lead him to comment that both rulers stressed the display of the spectacle and the "accentuation of the submission of India" (Dueck, *Strabo* 104). Strabo describes that Indian ambassadors sent gifts and an Indian sophist who burnt himself at Athens (see Dueck, *Strabo* 104). Noticing cultural heterogeneity in the Roman Empire, Strabo differentiated the cultures of different places claiming that a well-governed empire could help transform warlike but unproductive people into "genuine" human beings and thus the justification of conquest seemed to be his main theory. Nicolet, for example, found in Strabo that victories over conquered lands are stressed while Britain, one of Augustus's conquests, was "awkwardly concealed" (40). Nicolet thus contends that Strabo's description of the world is "constructed so as to lead to Rome's pretended universal domination" (47).

Modern historians acknowledge that the invention of "Christian Indies" represented in the letter of Prester John transcends regional differences along with the age of discovery, because the real realm as described in the letters is full of uncertain characteristics, that is, the landscape description is imaginary. One of the most discussed "possible" locations of the realms of Prester John is a Mongolian realm (Beckingham 271-8) ruled by Ta-shih Yeh-lti (1087-1143), who was born in a ruling family of the Liao Empire. In Chinese history, Yeh-lti is understood as trained in Sinitic letters (Chinese) and in the Khitan language and he was the only person from his tribe who received the first award at the imperial examination of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) (see Biran 12-31). The territory of Yeh-lti Ta-shih extended to the Caspian area after he defeated the Seljuk Turks. Yeh-lti Ta-shih during his reign welcomed visitors of different religions and he was said to be sympathetic towards Buddhism although converted to Islam in old age. At the time of turmoil in China and Central Asia, Yeh-lti was respected as one who chose not to submit to the Jurchen conquerors (Jin Dynasty 1115-1234) (Ji 20-35). He moved westward and defeated the Turks at Samarkand in the Battle of Qatwan in 1141 and anointed himself as king. The diplomatic relationship between the Qara Khitai Empire and Nestorian Christians was reputable from the eleventh century. It is possible that the foreign traders who crossed this area, established churches and the earliest one was founded in the eighth century (see Biran 178). Yeh-lti also circulated a letter to his neighboring countries, claiming: "My ancestors founded a vast empire, and had to endure many trials ... Now the Jinm who are subjects of our dynasty, massacre our people and destroy our cities ... Now, relying on the justice of my cause, I ... have come to ask your assistance for the extermination of our common enemy" (Yeh-lti qtd. in Brian 29; see also Dunnell 98-99). For Michael Prawdin, when the news that Yeh-lti crossed the Gobi Desert, defeated the Seljuks, and founded a mighty realm, means is that this impacted the forming of the crusades. The empire extended its influence in such a way that Khitan (Qara Khitay) was identified with China or Cathay (see also Bosworth 380). It is understandable also that Nestorian Christians would confirm that they formed a kingdom in the East because the Assyrian Church of the East spread into China during the Tang Dynasty (see Yan 383; during the Yuan Dynasty, there were more than seventy Nestorian churches in China and occidental Christian music was introduced to China [see Ge 338]). Although the search of Christians beyond Europe was still fervent in the early sixteenth century, the lost tribes referred to Prester John and his followers remain a mystery.

Mapping the imaginary realm of Prester John is narrative mapping similar to and anticipating later iconological mappings and it carries the context of political power because of its ideological significance. As Brian J. Harley notes, the greater territorial and social ambitions are, the greater its appetite for maps (31). Thus, maps are a socio-political production while symbolic meaning behind the

narration of geography is governed by social codes as Christopher Marlowe's then contemporary text suggests:

Give me a map; then let me see how much  
Is left for me to conquer all the world,  
Along Armenia and the Caspian Sea,  
And thence unto Bithynia, where I took  
The Turk and his great empress prisoners.  
Then march'd I into Egypt and Arabia;  
And here, not far from Alexandria,  
Whereas the Terrene and the Red Sea meet,  
Being distant less than full a hundred leagues,  
I meant to cut a channel to them both,  
That men might quickly sail to India. (Part 2, 123)

Pomponius Mela (ca. AD 43) divided the world into five zones, two of which are habitable. Durante Pachero Pereira placed India at about 63 degrees north latitude (see Diffie, Wallis, Shafer, Davison 6) and this technique of mapping helped the expansion of Europe and its relations in trade between the East and the West. Michael Uebel notes that the imperial expectation and formation of expansionism triggered by the letter of Prester John were founded on a quest for trade and material resources and agrees with Umberto Eco who suggests that the late medieval age, like the following age of exploration, has demonstrated the mad taste for "collecting, listing, assembling" (Eco 502; Uebel, "Imperial" 262). And Francis Millet Rogers confirms that the Infante Don Pedro of Portugal was influenced by religious fervor to search for Prester John's imagined realm, but that many others departed for commercial reasons (160).

Northern Africa was for a long time — in antiquity — the mediator in the trade between the Roman Empire and Asian India and even as late as 1527 Damiao de Gois and Francisco Alvares were reported to return to Lisbon with an Ethiopian Christian (see Russell 401-11). The Ethiopian kingdom of Axum, for example, is within the network system of trade with routes of Indian Ocean; hence, Stanley M. Burstein suggests that "Mediterranean languages for Indian spices such as pepper and ginger indicate that many of the products typical of the fully developed late Hellenistic and early Roman period trade were already being traded westward" (4). Of note is that while before the fourteenth century travel to North Africa was comparatively safe, ventures to the East were more hazardous. Early geographers and sailors tended to assume that the southern part of Africa merged with a land mass in India and thus to contact the prosperous East was a part of the economic interest for people in the West (see Phillips 5). The expectation of "foreign" and "strange" was not rare, but mystification in early geographical knowledge was common. Towards the ninth century when the West is conscious of the potential power of Muslims, a military power that could defend the West was highly expected; Giovanni de Piano Carpini was commissioned to visit Genghis Khan (1126-1227). J.R.S. Phillips refers to William of Rubruck, who in his travel writings mentions he heard about Prester John in the lands of the Mongols but without getting information about the location of the realm (73).

In conclusion, the above discussion of narrative mapping — *graphein* (geographical narrative) — was a significant way to learn about the physical world in antiquity and the middle ages. If cartography provides a concrete location of a site, a geographical narrative provides information about the location's nature and its topographical, botanical, or zoological information (Dueck, "The Geographical" 236). Through their narrative, writers tended to reveal their own position and relation to the place described. In this sense, *graphein*, similar to the later field of topography, tended to be in the service of power. By revealing knowledge concerning cultural, social, and political elements, these descriptions demonstrate boundaries and property relations from the perspectives of the narrator or the writer to the readership. Since landscape is a part of signifying systems composed of historical conventions, *graphein* involves representation and interpretation. In sum, travels — whether individual or for conquest — to other parts of the world are politically and economically significant and the above discussed texts suggest that this has been the case in antiquity and the middle ages too.

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