The Letters of the Ethiopian Ambassador Mateus and his Embassy to Lisbon: When Prester John Actually Ruled Ethiopia, 1509–1520

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by Alessandro Bausi
in cooperation with
Aaron Michael Butts, Bairu Tafla, Ludwig Gerhardt, Hewan Semon Marye, Susanne Hummel, and Alexander Meckelburg

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The Letters of the Ethiopian Ambassador Mateus and his Embassy to Lisbon: When Prester John Actually Ruled Ethiopia, 1509–1520

ADAM SIMMONS, Nottingham Trent University, and SÉBASTIEN GARNIER, CNRS

Introduction
The relationship between Ethiopia and Prester John, the mythical ruler from the East searched for by the Latin Christians of Europe since the twelfth century, is long established in scholarship for the period between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is not the intention of this article to recycle this discussion. Instead, this article seeks to highlight an important set of four letters written by the Ethiopian ambassador to Portugal, Mateus, between late 1517 and 1518, which have hitherto largely been overlooked in both Ethiopian-centric and Eurocentric scholarship, particularly for their importance in any discussion regarding the Ethiopian association with Prester John. These letters are significant as they pose a challenge to a growing scholarly narrative. In recent decades, Ethiopianist scholarship has increasingly argued that the Prester John myth was solely a Latin European phenomenon and was of no interest to the Ethiopians at all, not least on account of no reference to the Prester John myth in any surviving Gəˈɛz source. This has been in order to challenge the lack of an Ethiopian perspective in previ

1 For overviews of this presentation in scholarship, see, amongst many: Lefevre 1944; Hamilton 1996; Salvadore 2017; Kurt 2013; Knobler 2017, 30-56; Giardini 2019; Krebs 2020.
2 All four are currently held at the Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 39; ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 40; ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 41; ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 42. Paraphrased editions and Portuguese translations of two of the letters have previously been published in de Sousa 1790, 89–97, but these should be avoided due to their many inaccuracies and incomplete nature. All four letters were referenced by Jean Aubin in the most complete study of Mateus’ embassy to date in 1976, but not in discussion of the explicit adoption of the Prester John discourse by Mateus: Aubin 1976. Aubin intended to publish the letters in 1980 and in 1996, but no editions or translations were ever made: Aubin 1976, 28, n. 136; Aubin 1996–2006, III, 405, n. 120. Since Aubin, the letters have seldom been referenced in scholarship discussing the embassy directly; for example in: Salvadore 2017, 107–123; Krebs 2021, 142–149.

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ious otherwise largely Euro-centric scholarship. Indeed, Prester John’s association with the Ethiopian kingdom has recently been described by Verena Krebs as a ‘wholly exogenous, proto-orientalist European fantasy’. On the whole, this remains true. However, Mateus’ letters require more attention in this discussion and suggest there may not have been a universal rejection of the myth by certain Ethiopians, or those acting on behalf of Ethiopia, if geopolitics required, particularly by ambassadors. In each of his letters Mateus explicitly identifies himself specifically as مَاتيُوس انبشدور بَرست ْجُوان (Mātiyūs anbašadūr Brist Ğuwān). The ambassador of the Ethiopian embassy, which set out for Lisbon in 1509 and returned to Ethiopia in 1520, personally identified himself as being the subject of Prester John in his own words; this was not merely another false Latin Christian statement which was ignorant of Ethiopian reality. This article intends to situate these four letters within future discussion of Ethiopia’s relationship with the Prester John myth.

Mateus’ association with Prester John is a common feature of Portuguese and Latin texts during the period of the embassy, including Portuguese letters said to be sent on behalf of the ambassador, yet none can undoubtedly be said to reflect Mateus’ own words unlike his own Arabic letters. His Arabic letters pose questions regarding Ethiopia’s engagement with the Prester John myth, or, at least, the diplomatic methods employed by at least one Ethiopian ambassador. For the period prior to the 1509 embassy related in this article, Verena Krebs has highlighted how Ethiopia had explicitly rejected any association with Prester John. Besides the evidence of absence within the Gəˈez corpus, the only explicit example we have of Ethiopians rejecting any association between Ethiopia and Prester John comes from a Latin text recording the questioning of four Ethiopian monks who arrived at the Council of Florence in 1441 by Biondo Flavio, the papal secretary. Ethiopia’s association with the myth of the Prester stemmed from a European misinterpretation of apocalyptic narratives which were disseminating in both Egypt and Ethiopia from the fourteenth century. However, as Marie-Laure Derat has emphasised, these Ethiopian and European discourses, while sometimes sharing similar traits, never became intertwined because in Ethiopia such discourses did not narrate an Ethiopian Christian victory over the Muslims, but, rather, signified Ethiopia’s role as the successor to Israel as the chosen land; hence why

3 Krebs 2021, 4.
4 The transliteration of the Portuguese embaixador in the text, rather than applying a more common Arabic term for ‘ambassador’, such as rasīl, qāṣid, or safīr, is significant and will be discussed below.
5 Krebs 2020.
6 Nogara 1927, 23.
7 Derat 2012, 133-139; Giardini 2019.
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Prester John played no role in comparative Ethiopian discourse. The monks’ rejection of any Ethiopian association with the Prester John myth has therefore been highlighted for reflecting the exogenous nature of the myth for Ethiopians. That said, Mateus’ letters pose questions for the disconnect between the message held within Ethiopia and the lengths ambassadors would go to achieve their aims, even if they actively contradicted previous messages.

Indeed, Mateus may not have been alone in engaging with the Prester John myth as an ambassador for Ethiopia when we contextualise his letters with what could be said from the (possible) actions of other Ethiopian ambassadors, regardless of the otherwise seemingly consistent dismissive approach to the myth by their respective sponsors. For instance, prior to Mateus, a Portuguese receipt from 1454 refers to one ‘Jorge Enbaçador de Preste Joham’. Without any sources akin to those written by Mateus to offer further context, we can only say that this ‘Jorge’, or Giyorgis to his contemporaries, was at least perceived by the Portuguese to be an ambassador of Prester John; whether he adopted such a persona himself or not cannot be gleaned from the available sources. Nevertheless, following Mateus a similar example occurs in the case of Šaggā Za’ab, the Ethiopian ambassador to Lisbon sent by ‘Aše Lèbna Dǝngǝl in which we do have more information. Despite the absence of Prester John in Lèbna Dǝngǝl’s own correspondence with Latin Christians, in Lisbon Šaggā Za’ab informed Damiao de Góis of the etymology of the name of Prester John in his Fides, Religio, Moresque Aethiopum which suggests an engagement with the Prester John myth similar to Mateus. In the first edition, published in Leuven in 1540, Damiao de Góis referred to Prester John as Pretiosi Ioannis, which was expanded upon in the text’s reprinting in Paris in the following year. Under Šaggā Za’ab’s direction, he posited that Prester John should actually be called Ioannes Preciosus because in Gǝ‘ǝz it is Ioannes Belul or Ioannes Encoe, which he says meant ‘precious’ or ‘high’. The Go’az names given by de Góis—Žan ḅǝlul (Belul) and Žan Ἑνκ (‘Enq)—should actually translate via the Portuguese conflation of Žan 8

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8 Derat 2012, 139.
9 Krebs 2020.
10 Azevedo 1915–1934, II, 357.
11 For Lèbna Dǝngǝl’s letter, see: Sergew Hable Selassie 1974, 558–564.
12 The Latin text reads: ‘Scribitur enim nostro sermone his characteribus ῥ’γ : ᾦ Λ Λ Λ quod sonat Ioannes Belul, hoc est, Ioannes Preciosus, sive Altus: & in Chaldaica lingua sie scribitur ῥ’γ : ῶ ὁ ὁ ὁ quod est, Ioannes Encoe, id si interpreteris, etiam Ioannis Preciosi sive Altii significatum habet’ (‘It is written in our language with these characters ῥ’γ : ᾦ Λ Λ Λ which sounds like Ioannes Belul, that is, Ioannes Preciosus (Precious), or High: and in the Chaldaic language it is written ῥ’γ : ῶ ὁ ὁ ὁ, that is Ioannes Encoe, which you can interpret as also having the meaning of Ioannis Preciosi or High’): Góis 1541, 89.
with ‘John’ as ‘John (the) pupil (of the eye)’ and ‘John (the) gem’ if de Góis’ transcriptions are correct. If, in this case, ʿƎnq” represents de Góis’ definition of ‘precious’, Bǝlul would instead be expected to read Ъул (Alephant A), ‘high’, and then therefore raises the possibility of a printing error given the similar letter forms. The presence of Bǝlul has been explained by the phrase Bǝlul ḵoy, ‘my pupil’ (ብሉለ፡ኾይ), which appears alongside żan ḵoy, ‘my king’ (ዠን፡ኾይ), in later sources referring to the Ethiopian ruler, as noted by Alessandro Bausi, and which Hiob Ludolf emphasized in his 1691 Commentary to his earlier Historia Aethiopica that Bǝlul in de Góis’ appellation actually translates as ‘pupil’ and not ‘high’ as de Góis had claimed. However, de Góis claimed that all Gǝ’ǝz words in his text were signed off by Ṣaggā Za’ab (labelled as ‘the Orator’) himself, posing the possibility that even if Bǝlul was intended, Ṣaggā Za’ab would appear to have given a different definition to de Góis in order to marry the Gǝ’ǝz appellation and the European narrative if, indeed, Bǝlul was not instead employed as a metaphor for ‘high’. Moreover, as noted by Jeremy Lawrance, the Legatio Dauid Aethiopiae regis, the publication of missives from Ethiopia handed to the pope by Francisco Álvarez following his return to Europe, published seven years before the first edition of the Fides, had given the etymology of Prester John as gyam, meaning ‘powerful’, in its postscript. This would seemingly suggest that Ṣaggā Za’ab had actively tried to strengthen an Ethiopian origin to the name Prester John, contrasting the explanation given by Álvarez from information he had gained in Ethiopia, in order to enhance the chances of success for his diplomatic aims as he informed de Góis and likely others during his time in Europe. Despite the absence of Prester John in Ethiopian sources and surviving correspondence between Ethiopian nagast and Latin Christian rulers, Mateus’ letters provide non-exogenous evidence that at least some Ethiopian ambassadors, such as himself, Ṣaggā Za’ab, and maybe the otherwise unknown Jorge, possibly did indeed occasionally independently engage with the Prester John myth while operating within Latin Europe, particularly if it increased their chances of diplomatic success. The examples of Mateus and Ṣaggā Za’ab would suggest that the adamant dismissal of the relationship between Ethiopia and the myth of Prester John by the monks at Florence was not necessarily as fervent by the sixteenth century. Limited evidence prevents us from making any further conclusions regarding the other ambassadors so let us return to the case of Mateus.

13 Žanhoy’, EAe, V (2014), 138b–140b (A. Bausi); Ludolfi 1691, 222.  
14 Góis 1541, 94.  
15 Anon. 1513; Lawrance 1992, 313.
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The 1509–1520 Embassy

ʾƎtege ʾƎleni, who was acting as co-regent for the then minor Lǝbna Dǝngǝl, sent Mateus to lead an embassy to Lisbon in 1509.16 According to surviving copies of ʾƎleni’s letter which was taken to Lisbon by Mateus, the embassy was sent in response to the request for Ethiopian aid by three agents of the Portuguese crown who had arrived at the Ethiopian court in the previous year.17 The embassy was to inform Dom Manuel of Mamlûk plans to attack the Portuguese fleet in the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean, relay the message that Ethiopia would aid the Portuguese however they could, and sought marriages between the Ethiopian and Portuguese royal families. To cement the good will of the Ethiopian embassy, it was also despatched with a piece of the True Cross to gift to Dom Manuel.18 The military focus of this embassy was in stark contrast to that of previous embassies sent by Ethiopia to Latin Europe since 1402, which held cultural and artisanal desires.19 The embassy was small, primarily to avoid arousing suspicion on its journey, and appears to only have officially consisted of Mateus and one other, an Ethiopian called Yāʿqob, who was seemingly from the Ethiopian nobility.20 In one of his letters (no. 39), however, Mateus refers to Yāʿqob as ‘my son’ (waladī), implying that Yāʿqob was indeed his biological, rather than spiritual or metaphorical, child, which could otherwise have been open to interpretation if he had employed the less specific ibnī, and would suggest that the Ethiopian Yāʿqob was born to a union between an Ethiopian woman and Mateus. Any links to Yāʿqob’s supposed nobility are not made in the letters. In addition to Mateus and Yāʿqob, the embassy did contain others, too. It was reported that the total number of the

16 Naguš Nāʾ od died in 1508 leaving his infant son, said to then be the age of 11, to take up the throne under the oversight of a tripartite regency led by ʾƎtege ʾƎleni until he reached the age of maturity at 20.
17 João ‘the priest’, João Gomes, and Sīdī Muḥammad.
18 At least two copies are known. A copy of ʾƎleni’s letter which was said to have originally been located in Shewa was published by Sergew Hable Sellassie: Sergew Hable Sellassie 1974, 554–558. Another copy, found in a c. sixteenth- or seventeenth-century manuscript currently held at the Qaṛuynyo Mādhjane ʾĀlam Church in Goğgām, MS G1-IV-301, ff. 102v–103r, appears to have circulated in different manuscript networks and was not seemingly known to Sergew Hable Sellassie during his publication of the other: Sergew Hable Sellassie 1974, 565. In both manuscripts, ʾƎleni’s letter is immediately followed by ʾAṣe Lǝbnा Dǝngǝl’s letter which was delivered to Dom João III in 1527 and are independent additions to the main manuscript text. However, unlike the European versions, the Ethiopian versions erroneously associate the letters with Dom João III (r.1521–1557). A Portuguese copy, first published in 1521, can be found in Thomas and Cortesão 1938, 29–30 (57–59). A Latin translation, based on a Portuguese copy, was published in Góis 1532, A4a–A6a.
19 See Krebs 2021.
20 Aubin 1976, 23–24. Yāʿqob appears to also be referred to as Pēṯros in a much later Ethiopian source: Sergew Hable Sellassie 1974, 552.
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group who arrived in Goa on its outward journey was twelve: Mateus, Yāʾqob, two women (Mateus’ wife and another), and eight, possibly enslaved, servants. By early 1512, after the embassy had arrived in Goa, the Governor of India, Afonso de Albuquerque, returned from his sacking of Malacca. Albuquerque received the embassy with great pleasure, yet it was not until December of that year that it was organised for the embassy to travel onward to Lisbon. For Albuquerque, Mateus’ arrival offered a chance to expand Portuguese dominion in the Red Sea with the aid of the Ethiopian ruler.

The embassy was widely epitomised by mistrust and suspicion by the Portuguese despite Albuquerque’s welcome hospitality. Both Mateus and Yāʾqob were held in custody upon their arrival at Dabhol even before making it to Goa, the successful outcome of which was largely due to the intercession of Albuquerque. Unlike many, both Albuquerque and Dom Manuel proved to be staunch allies of Mateus as Ethiopia’s ambassador. Indeed, the favour of the Portuguese king was felt upon the embassy’s eventual arrival in Lisbon. After leaving Goa, the embassy made its way to Kannur where they boarded the ship of Bernardim Freire, the Santa Antonio o Grande. However, Freire, further advised by Francisco Pereira, the captain of the accompanying Santa Maria da Conceição, like others in Kannur, suspected Mateus to be an imposter and put him in chains as the ships wintered at Mozambique on its way to Lisbon. Mateus complained of his treatment to the king upon his arrival in Lisbon in February 1514, where they stayed for little over a year. In turn, the king imprisoned Freire and Pereira. Albuquerque, who did not share the suspicions of the likes of Freire and Pereira, sent an additional letter to Dom Manuel in October 1514, restating his plans for Portuguese activity in the Red Sea, especially if an alliance could be formed with the Ethiopian nəguš with the arrival of Mateus in Lisbon. Equally, no such suspicion appears to have been held by Manuel, who bestowed upon both Mateus and Yāʾqob a knighthood of the Order of Christ on 2 April 1515, five days prior to their departure from Lisbon. They were to return to Ethiopia accompanied by a Portuguese embassy, initially led by Duarte Galvão, as Manuel sought to connect with the Ethiopian ruler whose letter Mateus bore. The mistreatment of the embassy by the Portuguese during both its voyage to Lisbon and on its return is a repeated

21 Whether Mateus’ unnamed wife was also Yāʾqob’s mother is unclear. The other woman may have been Yāʾqob’s wife but could equally have been another female relative or companion.
22 Aubin 1976, 23.
24 Albuquerque 1576, 445.
26 Aubin 1976, 55.
theme in Mateus’ letters. The return was once more fraught with Portuguese suspicion and the embassy’s return to Ethiopia was repeatedly thwarted and delayed once back in India.\textsuperscript{27} Even early on in the return disaster struck as Yā’qob had died by the end of 1515, whose death Mateus blamed on Lopo Soares de Albergaria, the new governor of India who sailed with the fleet to replace Albuquerque, in letter no. 39.\textsuperscript{28}

It was not until 1520 that their return was completed, aided by another change in governor in the form of Diogo Lopes de Sequeira, with the Portuguese embassy eventually reaching Ethiopia now being headed by Rodrigo de Lima following the death of Duarte Galvão on the Red Sea island of Kamaran in mid-1517. Leaving India in February, Mateus and the Portuguese arrived at Massawa in April. According to the \textit{Carta das novas}, upon arrival Mateus was confirmed as the ambassador of Ethiopia and as ‘our father Mateus’ by the Ethiopians.\textsuperscript{29} Finally validated, Mateus began to lead the Portuguese to the Ethiopian court but died in May following a disease while at the monastery of Dabra Bizan, about 30 miles inland from Arkiko (Hargigo), the Ethiopian satellite port of Massawa to its south. Following Mateus’ death, the Portuguese continued to address Lǝbna Dǝngǝl as Prester John, but received no similar responses from within Ethiopia akin to those of Mateus during his embassy that the \textit{nǝguš} was indeed Prester John as far as the surviving sources reveal.

\textbf{Mateus’ Letters}

All four letters are addressed to Dom Manuel and all open with Mateus self-identifying as the ‘ambassador of Prester John’. Significantly, he did not introduce himself first and foremost as the ambassador of either \textit{Iyūbyā}\textsuperscript{30} or \textit{al-Ḥabaša},\textsuperscript{31} neither of which appear in any of the letters’ openings, though \textit{al-Ḥabaša} is used elsewhere in all four letters. When either Ethiopia or its ruler (the ‘King of Ethiopia’) are mentioned explicitly in Mateus’ letters, notably he does use \textit{al-Ḥabaša}, further highlighting the significance of the toponym’s absence in his

\textsuperscript{27} Mateus’ letters tell us he stayed at Cochin during this period.
\textsuperscript{28} The death of Yā’qob is recorded in a letter dated 11 December 1515: Bulhão Pato 1884–1935, III, 169–170.
\textsuperscript{29} Thomas and Courtesão 1938, 39.
\textsuperscript{30} Or an equivalent spelling based on the \textit{Gə’ez} \textit{Ityōṗya}, which was the preferred way for Ethiopians to refer to their kingdom to a Latin Christian audience.
\textsuperscript{31} The historical Arabic toponym for the Ethiopian kingdom remained still in use within Ethiopia until the turn of the twentieth century prior to the adoption of the modern Arabic toponym \textit{Aṯyūbyā}, even appearing alongside the \textit{Gə’ez} \textit{Ityōṗya} which had otherwise long been adopted internally since the fourteenth century. For an example of the Ethiopian employment of both \textit{Ityōṗya} and \textit{al-Ḥabaša} as late as the nineteenth century, see the royal seals of Tewodros II (r. 1855–1868).
opening self-identifications. Mateus’ identity as the ambassador of Prester John, rather than that of Ethiopia, took precedence. The main text of the letters inform Dom Manuel of Mateus’ treatment by the Portuguese on his return journey to Ethiopia and all relate to the expedition into the Red Sea in 1517 which sought to land the returning embassy and the accompanying Portuguese in Ethiopia. The letters, which would seemingly have been written in late 1517 or 1518 once the failed expedition returned to India, though no date is explicitly given in the texts, ultimately focused on his fractured relationship with the new governor of India, Lopo Soares de Albergaria, who had since replaced Afonso de Albuquerque. Mateus repeatedly complains about the treatment he suffered at the hands of Albergaria since leaving the Portuguese court in Lisbon despite the favourable treatment afforded to him by Dom Manuel. The expedition related in Mateus’ letters disembarked from India in early February 1517 and entered the Red Sea in mid-March. For the expedition into the Red Sea, Mateus was put on the ship of Albergaria’s nephew, João da Silveira, the São Pedro.32 João, or Ḍūn Ḷūwān in the letters, is described as being more obedient to Albergaria, rather than to the king. After a delay of twenty-four days at Dahlak, the captain sent a small group ashore with instruction to acquire provisions. Mateus protested, as the sultan knew who he was (the brother of the patriarch) and was a thief and a murderer, yet Mateus was ignored. The group, led by Lourenço do Carmo, were killed. Following this, Mateus encouraged the fleet to sail to either Massawa or Arkiko where there would be Christians and people who knew him. However, the fleet instead sailed to the Yemeni island of Kamaran which also coincided with Duarte Galvão’s death in early June. All of Mateus’ letters relate the events of mid-1517 until he was then taken to Cochin. It was there that he wrote his letters, making the active choice not to employ a Portuguese scribe for their composition the even more noteworthy. The core of each letter recycles the same emphasis, mainly relating how Mateus had no money or provisions and the events on Dahlak, though personal loss also features. In addition to the loss of his ‘son’, Yāʿqob, on the journey from Portugal to India Mateus also relates the loss of his wife by the time of writing letter no. 39.

All four of the letters appear to be written in the same hand from Mateus’ perspective—presumably that of Mateus himself rather than a scribe—and seemingly in a rushed manner with the occasional error and written on either two (nos. 39, 40, 41) or three (no. 42) sides of paper. Each letter is of similar physical size (no. 39: 310 x 220 mm, no 40: 295 x 220 mm, no. 41: 296 x 225 mm, no. 42: 310 x 225 mm) and with differing degrees of damage to the respective texts, though all remain almost completely, if not entirely, legible. Their existence is particularly

32 He was also on the same ship as the Florentine Andrea Corsali who wrote a letter to Lorenzo de’ Medici, ruler of Florence, in 1517 which noted the presence of Mateus on the Red Sea expedition of Lopo Soares de Albergaria: Ramusio 1550, 196a–203b.
of note given that other known surviving correspondence concerning Mateus are written in Portuguese by a scribe and only signed in Arabic by Mateus along with a drawn symbol of the cross (see Figs. 1 and 2). The Arabic signatures, while showing similarities to the writing style of his name in the letters, do not offer enough to definitively compare (Table 1), but presumably all were written by Mateus rather than a scribe given what similarities can be gleaned after accounting for possible situational variances of production, and any other extenuating factors which could have affected his writing style (for example Fig. 2 and letter no. 42). In one surviving case, a Portuguese letter signed by Mateus in Arabic was written in the same year as his own Arabic letters (Fig. 2) making it a significant contrasting example and presumably further indicates that the Arabic letters were not written by an accompanying scribe but by Mateus himself despite residing in Cochin with access to Portuguese scribes if he had wished to employ one, possibly indicating a sense of urgency after the failure of the expedition when other channels via Portuguese intermediaries had not proven fruitful. Indeed, inconsistencies in the writing would suggest they were not written by a professional Arabic-writing scribe.

Table 1: Comparisons of Mateus’ Signature and Written Name

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<td>See Fig. 2</td>
<td>See Fig. 5, Letter 2 (No. 40)</td>
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<td>See Fig. 7, Letter 3 (No. 41)</td>
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<td>See Fig. 9, Letter 4 (No. 42)</td>
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The information within the Arabic letters does not add any significant additional light on the embassy which has not already been gleaned from elsewhere. Yet, that said, the most remarkable aspect of the letters is Mateus’ clear active adoption of Portuguese terms, not least Mateus’ direct invocation of the Prester John myth. Mateus’ use of the transliteration of embaixador (anbaṣadūr) in his self-identification as the ambassador of Prester John indicates a deliberate word choice to most interest and appeal to his Portuguese audience. Indeed, this identity

33 For example, see below n. 49.
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transcends the four Arabic letters. For instance, letters sent by him, or more specifically on his behalf, to Dom Manuel written in Portuguese also invoke his association with Prester John. Mateus also consistently employs the Arabic transliteration of other Portuguese titles, such as al-brīnsī (príncipe), ḍūn (dom), and qabiṭamūr (capitão-mor) on occasion. He made an active choice not to translate these titles into Arabic equivalents. An interesting case of translation does occur elsewhere, however. Mateus repeatedly employs the Arabic sabiyy (‘boy/son’) in place of the Portuguese title fidalg— while a Portuguese title of the nobility it does literally translate as ‘son of somebody’. Given the adoption of other Portuguese titles, it is unclear why this particular one would be consistently translated in his letters. In one instance, unrelated to titles, Mateus even switches to a Portuguese term (būṭa/porta, no. 42), when he had previously been using the Persian word bandar in his other letters to denote the Ethiopian harbour at Arkiko (Ḥǝrgigo). Why this isolated change in this one case is unclear. The adoption of explicitly Portuguese terms in Mateus’ Arabic letters has been framed by Jean Aubin as being the result of close contact with the Portuguese since Mateus’ time in Goa before being reinforced in Lisbon. Like many of his uses of other Portuguese terms, Mateus’ self-association with Prester John would seemingly be a product of acquiring Portuguese terminology during his journey. It would, therefore, appear to have been a politically motivated choice on the part of Mateus.

Despite the repeated formula for opening his letters making his explicit connection to Prester John clear, Mateus largely does not refer to his ruler as Prester John directly; instead, any direct reference to his ruler in the body of his letters is always as the malik al-Ḥabaša. One exception appears in the margin of letter no. 39 which reiterates that the letter was ‘from Mateus anbaṣadūr Brist Ḟuwān, malik al-Ḥabaša’ (من ماتيوس انبشدور برست جوان ماك الحبشة) in addition to the self-identification in the greeting as found in all of his letters. Mateus was the ambassador of Prester John, yet his ruler was not first and foremost Prester John outside of the context of Mateus’ role. The identity of Prester John would, therefore, appear to be more important to Mateus’ mission, rather than being more generally adopted by Ethiopian rulers who wanted to project such an image. Importantly, Mateus’ arrival coincided with Dom Manuel’s fostering of crusade ideology during his rule, which especially flourished with the support of Afonso de Albuquerque as governor. One illustrative example to highlight the contemporary prospering of crusading discourse under Manuel can be seen in the title of the 1506 publication of the Gesta proxime Portuagens in India, Ethiopia et

34 For example: Bulhão Pato 1884–1935, III, 169–170. See also Fig. 1.
35 Aubin 1976, 29.
36 Similar reiterating statements are found in the margins of Mateus’ other letters, but without the additional malik al-Ḥabaša.
aliis orientalibus terris whose title was, uncoincidentally, reminiscent of the chronicling of the ‘deeds’ of the first crusaders in the Holy Land in earlier gesta, such as the anonymous Gesta Francorum (written by 1105), Guibert of Nogent’s Gesta Dei per francos (written 1109, edited up until 1121), and Fulcher of Chartres’ Gesta Francorum Iherusalem peregrinantium (written 1101–1127); a fact that Jean Delumeau has previously highlighted. Mateus could hardly have escaped Portuguese associations of Ethiopia and Prester John even if he had tried to. Instead, manipulation of this identity could be to his, and ultimately Ethiopia’s, benefit. Yet, why Mateus wrote letters to Dom Manuel in Arabic in these cases as well as having letters written in Portuguese via a scribe at other junctures of his journey is unclear. It is not known if Mateus personally wrote any other letters to Dom Manuel, either before or after these surviving four. The question of when Mateus adopted this identity, and whether he was proactive or reactive in its adoption, remains open.

With Mateus’ surviving letters only dating from after his arrival in Lisbon—and to late 1517 at the earliest—it poses the question: when did Mateus adopt such a position? Was it a stance he had taken from the beginning prior to his arrival at Goa on the outward leg of his mission or taken up at some point during it? When Afonso de Albuquerque returned to Goa after the sacking of Malacca in 1512 Mateus had already arrived in the city. According to Albuquerque’s Commentaries:

O embaixador disse, que sua vinda for a por Zeila, & que aquella ora que o Prestes loio o chamara pera o mandar, lhe descobrira sua vinda, sem dar conta a ninguem, & lhe dera aquellas cartas pera el Rey de Portugal, não lhe dizendo outra cousa.39

(Mateus) said that he had come via Zeila, and that only in that hour in which Prester John summoned him did he learn of his route so nobody was given notice, and then the Prester put the letters to the King of Portugal into the hands of Mateus without saying anything else.

Dom Manuel certainly understood that an ambassador from Prester John, who had been received in Goa via Dabhol, was on his way to Lisbon which he relayed in June 1513 in a letter to Pope Leo X.40 It would suggest that Mateus’ identity as the ambassador of Prester John may have been functioning long before he arrived in Lisbon, whether actively or passively. Indeed, the recorded responses of Mateus to the questions of António Carneiro during his residency in Lisbon suggests that Mateus had a more intimate knowledge of the Prester John myth beyond

38 Delumeau 1995, 181; Anon. 1506.
39 Albuquerque 1576, 446–447.
40 Anon. 1513, 4.
merely his general existence at least by his arrival in Lisbon in February 1514. For instance, in answering about his kingdom, Mateus appears to reflect the legend of Prester John when he apparently stated that his ruler reigned over sixty Christian kings, in addition to some Muslim kings; a trait remarkably similar to the Prester John myth most circulated by the Europeans themselves. The question remains, was Mateus an instigator or adopter of this supposed identity? Mateus’ self-identification as the ‘ambassador of Prester John’ is further problematised by the fact that his embassy was sent in response to initial Portuguese requests. As recently highlighted by Verena Krebs, the embassy was not, after all, an Ethiopian initiative. Why, then, would a diplomat acting on behalf of Ethiopia adopt an external discourse that fed into Portuguese desires if Ethiopia was solely responding to, rather than initiating, relations? These letters, despite being written in Arabic rather than Gǝʿǝz, would appear to be the closest thing to Ethiopian evidence to accompany the Latin Christian textual corpus which Matteo Salvadore framed as presenting Ethiopians (or those acting in the interests of Ethiopia in the case of Mateus) as having a proactive attitude to co-opt confusions about their homeland into a transcultural project for their own endeavours. However Mateus knew of Prester John, his responses to Carneiro would suggest that it was more than just merely knowledge of a name that he may have otherwise picked up along the way.

The letters also provide further insight into the personal identity of Mateus; a question long been debated. While Yāʿqob’s social status was unclear to the Portuguese, he was identified as an Ethiopian. Mateus’ origins, on the other hand, are many and contradictory beyond apparently arriving in Goa aged about fifty. Most commonly, on account of European sources, Mateus is described as an Armenian. In 1532, for example, Damião de Góis, who was later reaffirmed by the testimony of the then resident Ethiopian ambassador to Dom João III in 1540, Ṣaggā Za’ab, described Mateus as an Armenian (natione armenicus). However, Mateus alludes himself to being an Egyptian. Both in his letters and commented on by Portuguese sources, he described himself as the brother (ʾaḵū) of the abun (or al-baṭriyārkī in letter no. 41). If this is to be taken literally, it would appear almost certain that Mateus must have been Egyptian as each Ethiopian metropolitan was a Copt received from Egypt, although this may have been a rhetorical description. For instance, it should be emphasised that Mateus also employs the

41 Lawrance 1992, 321.
42 Krebs 2021, 144-145.
43 Salvadore 2017, 60.
45 Góis 1540, Mir-Miiv.
46 Afonso da Albuquerque was certainly under this impression prior to Mateus’ onward journey to Lisbon in late 1512: Bulhão Pato 1884–1935, I, 383; Albuquerque 1576, 446.
term 'ʾaḵū when he refers to Prester John being the metaphorical brother of Dom Manuel (no. 42). Ethiopian sources are equally unhelpful. Ǝleni’s letter only emphasises Mateus’ stature as someone without rival from within her entourage who acted on her behalf; it does not aid in a possible identification of his origin. Somewhat confusingly and without precedent, the nineteenth-century Goggām Chronicle, which was compiled from earlier manuscripts, even describes Mateus, who is named as Malṭos, as ‘German’ (ya-garmānyā, يَأْرَمَنْيَة).

Francisco Álvarez, who had arrived in Ethiopia in the Portuguese delegation accompanying Mateus’ return in 1520, adds further confusion. According to Álvarez, on the authority of Lǝbna Dǝngǝl and other Ethiopians, Mateus was a merchant, not actually a brother of the metropolitan (who instead identified Mateus as a former friend), and not even called Mateus, but someone originally called Abraham who had changed his name. Whether Mateus or Abraham, neither name is particularly unique to either Coptic or Armenian Christian communities. Yet, it may not be coincidental that all associations of Mateus with an Armenian heritage only appear during the reign of Lǝbna Dǝngǝl following Mateus’ death.

Whatever the case, the only thing that may be said is that Mateus was seemingly not an Ethiopian himself. The Arabic letters presented here add another dimension to this debate: none appear to be written by a well-versed Arabic speaker, suggesting that Mateus only had a limited education in Arabic despite seemingly being a regular writer, and his letters show influences from throughout the Arab world, particularly from Syria and the Gulf region. For instance, he repeatedly uses the Persian word bandar (‘port/harbour’) when referencing the harbour of the Ethiopian ruler and uses the Persian term al-barm (‘memory’) to make reference to tales (i.e. false memories) he accuses Lopo Soares of spreading about him. Perhaps most strikingly, he uses Bardʿān (‘depot/storehouse’ in Persian) as a toponym when referring to Portugal in a more general manner, seemingly employing the toponym as a result of engagement with the Armazém da Guiné e Índias in Lisbon which oversaw all imperial nautical matters, including provisioning for Mateus’ return. These examples aside, there remains too little to definitively suggest a Persian origin for Mateus beyond highlighting the Persian influences in his vocabulary, which, while notable in their use, remain few. Interestingly, his syntax when using ‘what’ (ايش) and ‘why’ (ليش) — both are also not the common forms used in Egypt — are not employed using Egyptian syntax, and

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47 Sergew Hable Sellassie 1974, 555, 557.
48 Sergew Hable Sellassie 1974, 552.
49 Alvares 1889, 186.
51 His script shows some regularity and habits that indicate that he was used to writing, even if the reading is far from evident in many cases. For example, Mateus dots the final ك, such as in علي, and л, while interdental graphemes ث are not always dotted.
neither is his future tense, which is formed via the prefix ح, rather than the more common ه found in Egypt, though this form is not unknown in Egyptian Arabic. Mateus may well have been an Egyptian, but he did not seemingly write like one and instead employed a more universal Arabic syntax with the occasional external influences on his vocabulary choices. A more in-depth linguistic analysis of the letters may reveal more regarding the question of his likely background and education, if not likely identity from a perspective hitherto overlooked.

Acknowledgement of the four surviving Arabic letters of Mateus poses the need for more nuance in the discussion pertaining to the Ethiopian relationship with Prester John, not only within European studies but, perhaps most importantly, within Ethiopian studies. While it remains most likely that these letters were the product of Mateus’ independent diplomatic manoeuvrings, the outright denial of any such Ethiopian engagement with the myth, despite the lack of currently known Ethiopian Gəˈaz material, cannot be maintained. Current evidence does not allow us to suggest whether the letters were reflective of a wider, and notably otherwise unevienced, diplomatic discourse utilised by certain Ethiopian ambassadors to Latin Europe when required as, when contrasted with Mateus’ letters, could now be suggested also of Jorge (Giyorgis) and Ṣaggā Za’ab, even if evidence for any individual Ṉaguš making any such associations remains lacking. Yet, its adoption by Mateus, and possibly others, marks a contrast between narratives employed officially and diplomatically. The death of Mateus and the previous coming of age of Lǝbna Dǝngǝl as the embassy returned to Ethiopia in 1520 has overshadowed the significance of Mateus’ diplomatic strategy. Yet, these letters pose additional questions regarding the strategy of Ethiopian diplomacy with Latin Europe and their seeming ability to manipulate the fixation of the Portuguese of finding Prester John. Whether Mateus was alone in such an endeavour remains open to question.

More broadly, these letters display the adaptability of diplomacy and of those conducting it. The diplomacy undertaken by Mateus highlights the independence afforded to diplomats to conduct their mission in whichever way they deemed to have the best chances of success, even if this meant navigating away from an otherwise long-held tradition. In the case of Mateus, he diverged from a narrative upheld by Ethiopian ḥagaṣt and adopted one held by his hosts. At what point Mateus adopted such a narrative is unclear from the sources, whether he always portrayed himself as the ambassador of Prester John or whether he only adopted this when his needs required it, namely the circumstances which led to his writing of these four letters. These letters provide the closest examples of Ethiopian sources referring to the Prester John myth that we have, rather than texts produced by a Latin Christian hand, even if they are written in Arabic rather than Gəˈaz. Despite the many more questions that Mateus’ letters threaten to pose, they provide one significant answer: at least between 1509 and 1520, it would appear that to some
degree, at least in the case of the Ethiopian ambassador Mateus, that it was not unknown for at least this one agent of Ethiopia operating in Latin Europe, if not others, to engage with Latin Europe’s identification of Ethiopia as the home of the mythical Prester John even if their sponsors did not.

Fig. 1 An example of Mateus’ signature on a Portuguese letter dated 11 December 1515. ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, Parte I, mº 19, n.º 52. © Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo
The Letters of the Ethiopian Ambassador Mateus and his Embassy to Lisbon

Fig. 2 An example of Mateus’ signature on a Portuguese letter written in 1517. ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 876, n.º 11, 4r. ©Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo
Editions and Translations\(^1\) of the Letters

ANTT, Colecção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, nç. 1, no. 39

\textbf{Letter 1} \(1\text{r}\)

من عبد بابکو ماتيوس انباشىر برست جوان الي مولانا
للسلطان؛ مينويل نصيرو اللہ اعلمکم يا مولانا من حين
فافتحكم من برعان الي هده الحين في عذاب شديد من
قيطمور ليشوارص فانه يذب في ويسقيني السسم ويعمل
السحر ويريد يقتلني ومعني الحامكي ومعني الآكل والشرب
ويريد قتلي والله تعالى ما يريد وقد قال جاكه وحسبه في
المملك خمسه عشر يوم في باب کوه حتا مات في الب (بحر)
اخذته ميت في المملك التي كنهن نور وقیرته وعملت له كل
شي وقد ارسلت وعرفتكم بهذه قبل عشرین وثلاثین كتاب
وبعد جلسست في الهند سنة ونصف في کشى وبعد قام
سافرد الي البحر الأصغر الي بهد وارمالي في مملك اسمه
سان بطوس وقبطانه اسمه صیون جوان ولا اعتطاني لا زاد ولا
اکل ولا شرب ومن بعش البس الذي اعتطاني مولانا للسلطان
جميعه واشتريت فيه الزاد واکل وشرب وقال قبطمور
البشرام ما قدرنا عليه بالسحر تغلبه
بالجوع وعتش او وقبطان ضون جوان عم شی معی امر
وانحسب ما عملو في القبطانات الذي جاوبتي عندكم الي
برعان ولان يا مولانا (للسلطان قبطمور البشرام لسن (١))
منش الي جعد المملك الذي اسمه سان بطوس الذي ان فيه
ربط عليه مملك اسمه الزدیکی وضعنا من المملك في باب

\textbf{APPARATUS} \(5\) \(^1\) We read reiterated vertically in the margin: من ماتيوس انباشىر برست جوان
ملک الحیشه. \(14\) \(^3\) He corrects above the incorrect صا. \(15\) \(^3\) He corrects above the incorrect
فیانه.

\(^1\) Translations have tried to remain as literal as possible, but the clarity of the Arabic syntax
in places has not always allowed for this.

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Translation

1r Letter 1 | [In the name of God the Living the] Eternal,
from the servant of your door, Mateus, Ambassador of Prester John (Arabic (Ar.) Anbaṣadūr Brist Ǧuwān) to our Sovereign Sultan Manuel (Ar. Ǧanūṣūl), may God Almighty help him.

I inform you from the moment I bid you farewell in Portugal (Ar. Bardʾān).1 (I was subject) to very bad treatment from Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. Qabiṭamūr Labušuwāris):2 he persecutes me, he pours me poison, he used witchcraft against me. He wants to kill me. He forbade me wages, he forbade me food and drink. He wants to kill me but God does not want this. He killed Ġākimah (Yā qob).3 He had him jailed on the ship fifteen days at the gate of Kawkah (?) until he died at sea. I took his corpse on the ship to Kannur (where) I buried him and cared fully for him. I wrote to you to let you know about this before in twenty (or) thirty letters. Then I stayed in India for one and a half years in Cochin (Ar. Kušī). Then he (Lopo Soares) set sail and travelled to the Yellow Sea (sic), to Jeddah. He threw me on a ship, the Sān Pedro, whose captain is called Dom Joāo (Ar. Dūn Ǧuwān). He did not give me any provision, neither food nor drink, I sold all the clothes that our Sovereign the Sultan, had given me. With that I bought provisions, food, and drink. Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. Qabiṭamūr Labušuwāris) said: ‘We could not kill him neither with poison nor with witchcraft. We will kill him with hunger and thirst’. Captain Dom Joāo (Ar. Dūn Ǧuwān) did me such bitter and miserable things that do not (even) compare to the captains who took me to you in Portugal (Ar. Bardʾān). Our Sovereign the Sultan, Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. Qabiṭamūr Labušuwāris) when he went to Jeddah, the ship whose name is Sān Pedro (Ar. Sān Bitrus) and on which I was, was attached to a ship called the Zankī (Conceição?). We lost (some) ships at the gate of Jeddah. The Zankī sunk. The winds hit them. The skipper did not know where to go. I told them: ‘Go

1 Mateus consistently uses this toponym throughout his letters and is clearly referring to Portugal more broadly. The literal meaning in Persian is ‘depot/storehouse’ so this would specifically indicate a reference to the Armazém da Guiné e Indias in Lisbon which oversaw all nautical matters of the Portuguese Empire. While practical, as it would have overseen the affairs for facilitating his return journey, it is unclear why Mateus does not employ the more generic Burtuqāl (سرعال), and instead focused on this specific imperial institution.

2 Capitão Mor in Portuguese.

3 Interestingly, the Arabic appears to transliterate the Portuguese form Jácome, rather than Yā qob.
جده وفرق المركب الإسباني وضريحهم البيح وما يعرف المعلم
ابن بروح فقتلتهم لهم أمشو بر الحبشة ان هو يركب ورسول الله
ملك الحبشة الجواب وكتب السلطان مولى قالو ميلع
وصل الي دهلك ولقو الآكل والغنم وألما وقتلت لضون جوان
جذبت في دهلك أربع عشرة عشرين نهار ايش جالس تعقب قوم
امشي م predecess وحرصنا بندر ملك الحبشة وقتلت له براس
فقال (انما اختم السلطان انه خادم)... للسلطان والتفرد
والنصر قرب صبي للسلطان ولقا في دهلك وقنا لها في
(ابن جينو) وقال ارسلنا قطع من البشوارق إلى دهلك نبيع
الفيل والبهار وتصلاح مع صاحب دهلك وقطمن ارسل
معها واحد يهودي واحد عبد واحد كركلو قَسِبٍ (ب) نطقهم
لصاحب دهلك يوديهم لنا الي الحبشة وقتلت لهم الحبشة ما
يدخلهم جاموس فقالو امشي معنا حاجبنا وقتلن لهم ان
وادي لحم حبانكم واعمك من جهتي واعطيهم الى الزيار
والى البحر سان (4) الذي في يندر الملك الحبشة واما من
أمر السلطان انما اروج وكمهم قديم كل الذي مركب ضون
جوان وضحوك علي وقالو ميلع مشينا الي دهلك قلت لهم
لا تدخلو دهلك ولا تنزلو هده سارق وهده كل يوم بمطرق
الحيوس والحيوسان (ا) يبيع ودده مسلم ودهد كافر ودهد
جالس في هده الحريصا ولا يقدر عليه برسب جوان روح الي
مخصص واني حرفقو الي بندر الملك في الرهاب فيه الحيصا
وفي الحبسان وغير الذي يعرفنا قال لا ترى الا الذي اردن
قطمئب البشوارق ونزلو لا مسيف ولا حربه وقتنهم وكتب
عليهم شهود أصحاب الجراني وهده كله حق وجميع ما
يقول لحم قطع من البشوارق جميعه كله كذب وانه نصر على
مولانا (السلطان انه بيد قاعي من جناب الالفننو البكرجي
ومن جناب برند اذى وبريد يعمل هده كله كذب ولا يريد

Adam Simmons and Sébastien Garnier

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to the Ethiopian shore. I will guide you. We will send to the King of Ethiopia the response and the letter of Sultan Manuel (Ar. ʿManūyīl’). They said ‘Fine!’.

They reached Dahlak. They found food, cattle, and water. I said to Dom João (Ar. ʿDān ʿĜuwān’): ‘I have stayed in Dahlak twenty-four days. What are you doing (here) waiting? Set sail! Go to Massawa and Arkiko, the harbour of the King of Ethiopia’. I added ‘For the sake of Sultan Manuel (Ar. ʿManūyīl’)!’ | He replied: ‘I do not serve the Sultan, I serve […]’ the Sultan. Then two crafts came to us sent from the Captain-Major (Ar. ʿQabīṭāmūr’ […] on her was Lourenço do Carmo (Ar. ʿAlwaṃṣū ʿQarmū’), fidalgo (Ar. ʿsabīy’) of the Sultan. They found us in Dahlak and we told them: ‘What made you come here?’.

They replied: ‘Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. ʿQabīṭāmūr Labuṣāwārīṣ’ has sent us to Dahlak in order to sell pepper and spices, (but also) to get in the good graces of the master of Dahlak. The Captain-Major (Ar. ʿQabīṭāmūr’) sent with us one Jew, one slave, one krlk(?)—a priest. We entrust them to the master of Dahlak who will guide them to Ethiopia for us’. I warned them: ‘In Ethiopia, no spy enters’. They said: ‘Come with us, we will see!’ I told them: ‘I will show for you your fidalgos (Ar. ʿṣibīyānakum) (the way) with my guidance, and entrust them to the monks, to the Bahr Sān (?)6 who is in the harbour of the King of Ethiopia. As for what concerns (the) Sultan, I do not go in to’. I spoke to them in front of all aboard the ship of Dom João (Ar. ʿDān ʿĜuwān’).

They laughed at me. They said: ‘Fine! We are going’. I warned them: ‘Do not go to Dahlak and do not get off (there)! Its ruler is a thief. Every day he robs the Christian captives and sells (their properties). He is a Muslim, he is an infidel! He stays on this island (as) a robber. (Even) Prester John (Ar. Brist ʿĜuwān’) cannot subdue him. Go to Massawa, to Arkiko, to the harbour of the King. There are monks, there are (different) Christians,7 there are those who know us’. He objected: ‘We only want what Captain-

4 Throughout his letters, Mateus’ use of ‘boy’ would appear to refer to the title of fidalgo within the Portuguese nobility which literally means ‘son of somebody’; in this case, a ‘son’ of the king.

5 Given the context, this may be an attempted transliteration of the Portuguese clérigo, but it is unclear. Why Mateus opted to employ a loanword in this case, rather than a common Arabic equivalent, is also unclear.

6 This would appear to, despite a clear error, presumably refer to the Bāḥr Nagāš. However, given Mateus’ correct use of the title Bāḥr Nagāš (Ar. Bahr Nakāš) elsewhere in letters nos. 41 and 42, maybe this should instead be read as a reference to another official, such as a harbourmaster.

7 Mateus’ choice of employing (C)ḥrāṣ(t)ān, rather than the normal Arabic word naṣārā, to describe these Christians is noteworthy, hence our translation between brackets reflecting a possible relation to different groups.
يفتح باب الحبشة ورديتي الي كمران الي عند قطمorum فقلت
له قوم ارسل معي اثنين عيسا (4) وايثين قريبه وخلي جميع
حوائج السلطان وأرسل معي اثنين فراضي وإرسل معي واحد
ارك واحده مسيحي والامشي اجيب لكم الجواب من ملك
الحبشة قال لا ما اريد انت روح لك من بلاد المسلمين من
اين ما تريد قلت له انا ما معني طريق الا مصوع ولا من
بردعنا ولا اجلس في الهند الي حين يجي جواب مولانا
السلطان ايش ما اراد يفعل في حكم السلطان طاعه وانا
جالس في الهند ابشر جواب مولانا للسلطان وإن ما بقا معي
أكل ولا أشرب ولا البس وقد راج مالي وراح منبري وراح
ولدى جاكمه وانا جالس لا مال ولا جامكيه ولا يعطي شي
البشوارص وانتو يا مولانا السلطان تعفو كل شي

ANTT, Colecção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 40
Letter 2

بسم الله الحسي النبوي | 1r

ممن عبد بابكم ماتيوس انبادشي برست جوان الي مولانا
للسلطان مضوي دولسه الله سلطان للهديه صالح بين
السلاطين الاملكم يا مولانا من جناب قطمور البشوارص
(من) حين افتقد في عذاب ويسقيني السم [...] السحر
 يريد بفتنني والله ما يريد ومعني الجامكيه ولا اكول ولا
شرب ولا ليس يكل يوم (قا) لين الكلام الفقحي وقد اخذني
معه الي البحر الأحمر وراح الي جدا = جدة = ورد مثل
اليهودي وانا في مركب مان بطرس وقبطنان المركب ضمن

APPARATUS | 10 4 The end of the text is written vertically in the margin on two lines. 16 5 We
read reiterated vertically in the margin: انبادشي ماتيوس برست جوان.

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Major Lopo Soares (Ar. Qabiṭamūr Labušuwāris) has ordered us’. They got off without swords nor weapons, and they were killed by them. The friends of al-Qrtlytī (?) wrote testimonies about them. All this is true. Everything that Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. Qabiṭamūr Labušuwāris) tells you, everything is only lie. You know, our Sovereign the Sultan, that he wants to kill me because of Afonso de Albuquerque (Ar. Aljinsū al-Baḵīrī) and because of Bernardim Freire (Ar. Barnad Fararī). He wants to make all these lies. He does not want to open the gate to Ethiopia. I returned to Kamaran, to the Captain-Major (Ar. Qabiṭamūr) and I told him: ‘Move! Send with me two Christians (?) and two crafts, keep all the things of the Sultan, send with me two farāḏī,9 send with me one arku,10 one Christian. I will go and bring (back) to you the answer from the King of Ethiopia’. He said: ‘No! I do not want to. Go yourself by the countries of the Muslims, by wherever you want!’ I replied: ‘I only have a road by Massawa. (Otherwise) (I have to go to) Portugal (Ar. Bardān), or I stay in India until the letter from our Sovereign the Sultan arrives’. ‘What?’ He did not want to obey the rule of the Sultan. (Now) I stay in India waiting for the answer of our Sovereign the Sultan. I have nothing left: no food, nor drink or clothes. I have lost my money, I have lost my wife, I have lost my son Ġākimah (Yāqūb). I stay without money or wages: Lopo Soares (Ar. Labušuwāris) does not give anything. You, our Sovereign the Sultan, know everything.

Letter 2 | In the name of God the Living the Eternal,
from the servant of your door, Mateus, Ambassador of Prester John (Ar. Anbašadūr Brist Ğuwān) to our Sovereign Sultan Manuel (Ar. Manūyīl), may God Almighty help him, Sultan of the World, pious among the sultans.
I inform you, our Sovereign, about Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. Qabiṭamūr Labušuwāris) that from the moment I bid you farewell (I was subject) to mischief: he pours me poison, […] witchcraft, he wants to kill me (but God does not want this). He forbade me wage; no food, nor drink or clothes. Everyday he insults me. He brought me to the Red Sea and went to Jeddah. He returned like the Jew (?)11 I was on the ship São Pedro (Ar. Sān Bīṭrus). The captain of the ship is Dom João (Ar. Dān Ğuwān). He did

8 الفريلسي: It is unclear who Mateus is referring to here as it shows no obvious similarity with any known names of the expedition, presuming the spelling contains no errors.
9 Somebody who divides inheritance in Islamic law. Its employment in this context is unclear.
10 From the Greek ἄρχων meaning ‘somebody who holds authority’, but the specific role of this individual here is not further elaborated upon.
11 The meaning of this passage is obscure.
جوان وعمل في الحبس ما عمل في برد فرري وافري برري
ومنعوني الأكل والشرب وقالو حتى يموت ومن جانب الوينصو
فومو الذي قلهم في دهلل فقدلت لهم لا تدخلو دهلل
امشيو إلي وضعو الي بلاد الحرسيان الذي يعرفو وترسل لكم
صبيانكم إلي عند ملك الحبشة قلوا لا ما تعمل إلا قل
لنا قطيمور وحلفهم براس منويب ويراس ملك الحبشة وباشم
الرب لا تدخل إلي دهلل هذه بلاد سراق وحرامي كل يوم
يسرق من خرسان من الحيوس ويبه(ب)بع ما رضوو وبعد
كلمست قطيمور في كمران امشي اللي مصوص او اللي بدر
ملك الحبشة اسمه حلفاقو وكل النصارى (كذا) والرهبان
يعرفو وترشو حوياكيم ونطلع الحبشة وترد الجوام على
للسلطان منويب قال لا ما اريد ولا افتح باب الحبشة
والحبشة ما هم نصرانيو وقال روح انت الي بلاد المسلمين
اين تريد قلت اننا ما معي طريق الا مصوص والا تردي الهند
حنا يريد جواب للسلطان | منويب اتكان يريد الجوام من
ملك الحبشة يرسل مراكب وقطعمر رجل عاقل يودينا الي
بدر ملك الحبشة وانكا السلطان منويب ما يريد، فهو يريد
الجوام على انيشادر وقولي لي روح اين ما تريد فذاك الحنين
الله تعالى يفتح لي طريق امشي فيه والا يدري الي عليه عمل
فراضي اخمد الرب وان يا مولانا السلطان (كذا) ما معي
شي لا اكل ولا (اشتر) وابعد ليسو حوياكي على الورد
واعلي الاكل والشرب وشامه على قير جاكم واما معني شي
اصفر علي نفسي حتنا و (الي) بالادي إن يا مولانا للسلطان
انت صالح بين الصلاميين (كذا) وترسل تشرتيا ليسرا من
بلاد المسلمين وتعتمهم خلصني وارسلي الجوام ايا
اما لا صدقنا عن ولدك المرستي وانا جالس في الهند الي
حيين يجيي الجوام من مولانا السلطان رضي الله تعالى وان
يا مولانا لا ناش كلام قطيمور ان جميع ما يقوله كله كدب

Adam Simmons and Sébastien Garnier

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in jail what Bernardim Freire and Francisco Pereira (Ar. Barnad Fararî wa-Afrîs Bararî) had done to me (on the voyage to Portugal). They forbade me food and drink, saying ‘so that he dies’. As for Lourenço do Carmo (Ar. Alwansu Qâmı) who they killed (with others) in Dahlak, I warned them: ‘Do not enter Dahlak! Go to Massawa, to the country of the Christians who know us! We send for you your fidalgos (Ar. șibiya nakum) to the King of Ethiopia’. They objected: ‘No, we only do what the Captain-Major (Ar. Qabiţamûr) tells us’. I swore to them: ‘For the sake of Manuel (Ar. Manûyîl) and for the sake of the King of Ethiopia, and by the name of Lord, do not enter Dahlak! It is a country of thieves and robbers. Everyday they steal from the Christians, from the Ethiopians, and they sell what pleases them’. Then I spoke to the Captain-Major (Ar. Qabiţamûr) in Kamaran: ‘Go to Massawa or to the harbour of the King of Ethiopia called Arkiko! All the Christians and the monks know us. You make your things go. We go up to Ethiopia and we bring the answer to Sultan Manuel (Ar. Manûyîl)’. He replied: ‘No, I do not want to, nor will I open the gate of Ethiopia. The Ethiopians are not Christians’ and continued: ‘Go yourself to the countries of the Muslims, to wherever you want!’ I answered: ‘I only have the road to Massawa, otherwise, you bring me back to India until I receive the letter (from) Sultan Manuel (Ar. Manûyîl). If he wants a letter from the King of Ethiopia, he (will) send ships. The Captain-Major (Ar. Qabiţamûr) is a clever man. He will guide us to the harbour of the King of Ethiopia. If Sultan Manuel (Ar. Manûyîl) does not want this, he sends the letter to the Ambassador and tells me: “Go wherever you want!”’ At this moment, God Almighty opens me a road to go. Otherwise, he brings me back to him. I will work and be satisfied to serve the Lord. Our Sovereign the Sultan, I have nothing: no food nor drink. Besides, my clothes and things are (expended) upon the provisions, the food and drink, (also) on the offerings for the grave of Ġākimah (Yā qob). I have nothing to spend for myself, or even to (go to) my country. Our Sovereign the Sultan, you are pious among the sultans. You send (riches) to redeem captives from the countries of the Muslims and you free them. Deliver me and send me the letter, ‘yes’ or ‘no’, by charity for your son the Prince (Ar. al-brinsî)! I stay in India until the letter from our Sovereign the Sultan arrives, God the Highest be pleased (of him). Our Sovereign, do not trust the words of the Captain-Major (Ar. Qabiţamûr). Everything he says, it is all lies. You know about Captain-Major Afonso de Albuquerque (Ar. Qabiţamûr Aljunsu al-Bakîrî) and
APPARATUS | 7 6 The word is difficult to read. 11 7 We read reiterated vertically in the margin: ماتيوس أباشدر برست جوان 20 8 It reads however. العطلش 21 8.
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about Bernardim Freire (Ar. Barnad Fararî). (This Captain-Major) wants no good for me. I swore to him, you Our Sovereign, against ‘Prester’ (Ar. brist) Munāǧī (Menezes?)\(^{12}\) (Alas), what the ‘prester’ did is like the wind, or rather shit (sic), or like the dog. Enough, o our Sovereign, you know everything. The fool feels no shame. Wisdom in those times is to no avail. The fools prevail, who mix up (things), while the trustworthy leave (?). Then they yell like the sheep, they do not know God Almighty. May God Almighty repair the situation, may He inspire you the good, Amen.

1r **Letter 3 |** In the name of God the Living the Eternal,

from the servant of your door, Mateus, Ambassador of Prester John (Ar. anbašadūr Brist Ġuwān) to our Sovereign Sultan Manuel (Ar. Manūyīl), may God Almighty help him.

I inform you that from the moment I bid you farewell in Portugal (Ar. Bard ân), (I was subject) to very bad treatment from Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. Qabiṭamūr Labušuwârīš). He wants to kill me but God does not want this. He forbade me wage, food, and drink. I sold everything I possess for food and drink and I had nothing left. He took me to Jeddah on the Red Sea, without money, food, or drink. He put me on board of the Sào Pedro (Ar. Sân Bīṭrīs). Her pilot’s name was Dom Joāo (Ar. Dūn Ġuwān). There was a(nother) ship attached to us called the Zankī (Conceição?). In the vicinity of Jeddah (there were other) ships with us. The Zankī sunk. We ignored where the Captain-Major (Ar. Qabiṭamūr) and the other ships went. They died of thirst. The soldiers and the skipper (of the boat I was on) did not know where to go. They wanted to land. I, our Sovereign, took them to Dahlak. I showed them the road to the shore of Ethiopia. I said to Dom Joāo (Ar. Dūn Ġuwān), captain of the ship: ‘For the sake of Sultan Manuel (Ar. Manūyīl), go to Massawa, to the harbour of the King of Ethiopia, half a day (from here)’. He replied: ‘I do not want to serve the Sultan, I serve Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. Qabiṭamūr Labušuwârīš)’. Twenty-four days later he plundered Dahlak. He took their sheep and cattle. He killed

\(^{12}\) It is unclear who this refers to. It could possibly refer to the governor’s nephew, Aleixo de Meneses, the Capitão-mor do Mar, and most senior Meneses in the East. The choice of ‘prester’ is unusual unless it is used to signify ‘elder’ as Meneses was not a priest. In any case, the significance of the employment of this transliterated word is unclear.
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السلطان انن اخذه قيطصور البشارص بعد حتى أرعبه وعشرين نهار نهب دهلك واحد غمها وفرقها ولات وأحد قلت ليش تعال هذه وسلطان دهلك عرفني اني اخو البطرياطكي وبعد أربعة وعشرين نهار ما تعرف قيطصور ولا المراكب ابن راحت

وبعد جانا من كرات (9) قيرتين (9) مركتين من عند قيطصور في الواحدة الصغير القرنصو قرو صبي السلطان وقلنا لهم في ايش جين ققالنا قيطصور الى دهلك ومعهم واحد عبد واحد يهودي واحد كرانكو مجنون (9) وقال لي يا اباشادر تعال امشي معنا قالت مرحبنا لهويت حاجي وييدي في مركب ضن جوان وقلت لهم امشو الي مصوع الي حرفقو بندر ملك الحبشة فيه نفسا فيه ربان فيه قسوس فيه الذي يبقونا ققالنا مليح وضن جوان حالف لي اني جالس جنب دهلك الي حين ما تيجي انا مركبين وتبدو خير ورحوبا خير والدي بعونونا (9) من النصار واهل الحبشة بعد بكرو من الصبح ه ساقو (9) المركب الي كمران ونحنا والونصنو قرو

(9) اخدنا الي دهلك وقلت لهم ليش تفعلوا هذه اول اخرب دهلك ضن جوان وصاحب دهلك حرامي وساق واختمو بلاده ايش تعملو عنده هده كل يوم برق الحيوس وبع ما سمعو مني دخلو وضحك عليهم وقال لهم انا ما حيكم الذي تريدها يانا افعل لكم قالوهله هذه اباشدر مانا منه انت تودي لنا هذه الثلاثة رجال الي عند ملك الحبشة قايمت مرحبنا

اعطي مركب من عنده وادبهم الي عند بحر نكاش من سلاطين الحبشة قالو مرحبنا وحلف لهم وهم اعطو له قماشنا بباياما الفرقي دهب وقال لهم اريد أقابلكم تعالو تمويل الي الساحل ولا تحتاو سيف ولا حرية وانا اجي واشاقنا نعمهم فقلت لهم لا شي قيطصور براس السلطان منوويل براس ملك

APPARATUS | 5 14 17 13 It reads however. 11 10 تکیمی. 8 12 We read reiterated vertically in the margin: مورما لملك ملك الحبشة.

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one (of them). I asked him: ‘Why do you do that while the (ir) sultan knows that I am the brother of the Patriarch (Ar. *al-batrisiyyārki*?)’ After twenty-four days we did not know where the Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*) and the ships had gone. Then two small crafts came to us (sent by) the Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*) from Krāt (?). On one of them was the small Lourenço do Carmo (Ar. *Alwanṣū Qarmū*), fidalgo (Ar. *sabiy*) of the Sultan. We told them: ‘Why did you come?’. They answered: ‘The Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*) sent us to Dahlak’. With them were a slave, a Jew, and a krālkhī *mahnur* (?).13 They added: ‘O Ambassador (Ar. *anbaṣadūr*), come and follow us!’ ‘For sure, I will!’. I left my things and my slaves on the ship of Dom João (Ar. *Ḍūn Gwān*). (Let us) go to Massawa, to Arkiko, the harbour of the King of Ethiopia. There are Christians, there are monks, there are priests. There are people who know us’. ‘Good!’, they said. Dom João (Ar. *Ḍūn Gwān*) promised me: ‘I (will) stay near Dahlak until [the ships (return)] and you bring news to write of those from the Christians and Ethiopians they know’.14 Two days after in the morning they sailed the ship to Kamaran. As for us, with Lourenço do Carmo (Ar. *Alwanṣū Qarmū*), they took us to Dahlak. I remarked: ‘Why did you do that? First, Dom João (Ar. *Ḍūn Gwān*) ruined Dahlak. Besides, the master of Dahlak is a robber and a thief. You ruined his country. What do you do by him? Everyday, he enslaves captives and (he) sells (them)’. They did not listen to me. They entered (the city) and he mocked them. He told them: ‘What is it that you want me to do for you?’ They told him: ‘This one is an ambassador (Ar. *anbaṣadūr*). We have no ties with him. Guide these three men to the King of Ethiopia for us’. He answered them: ‘For sure, I will! I provide one of my ships and I will guide them to (the) Bāhr Nagāš (Ar. *Bahr Nakāš*), one of the Ethiopian sultans’. ‘Thanks!’ they replied. He swore to them and they gave him fabric worth about one hundred *aṣrāfī* of gold.15 He requested from them: ‘I want to meet you. Come, get off to the shore. Do not carry swords or weapons. I will come and meet you’. I begged them: ‘No way, Captain. For the sake of Sultan Manuel (Ar. *Manūyīl*)! For the sake of the King of Ethiopia! For God’s sake! Do not get off, they will kill you!’ They replied: ‘You do not know anything. This is our friend. We swore an oath. He will guide our people to Ethiopia for us’. They went (ashore) and they were killed. They did not listen to my words. A report has

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13 Possibly a reference to a *clérigo* (cleric). In letter no. 39 this individual is specifically identified as a priest (*qaṣīs*).
14 The syntax of the Arabic text here seems faulty.
15 The equivalent of c. 350 g.
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الحبشة من شان الله لا تزول الي هذه يفتلكم وقائولي ان ما
تمعن شيء هذه صاحبنا وحلفنا معه وحده بودي لنا ناسنا الي
الحبشة وراحو وقلوه وما مسمع كلامي وكتب عليهن ورغم
بهده وقائنو لنا ما تعمل الا الذي قال لنا قطعمر وهرينا رحنا

ل 홋 قطعمر ومانو ثلاثة منهم وقلت الي قطعمر قوم انت
والمركب والناس تروح الي باب ملك الحبشة قال انا ما اريد
انت روح لك في حalk اين ما تريد ققدم كل بردعان قلته
انا ما اروح حنا اخد السلطان مونويل فارد له الجواب من
باب الحبشة وكل هده يريد فعل كدب وبيطل ولا يفتح
باب الحبشة من شان الفننشر البكركي قطعمر الأول ومن
شان بزند فری ونمن شان الحريس برري النوايح الندي خانوني
الي عندك الي بردعان ويريد يعمل هده كدب ويا مولانا
السلطان انت صنطو وتعرف كل شي ولا تسمع كلام
قطعمر البشوارق فانه يريد قدني قاله ما يريد؛ وان جميع ما
يكتب لك كلب كدب والمحور ما عليه حرح وانت سلطان
الدنبا وانا كلامي الذي أرسلت لكم كله قول صح

Letter 4: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mc. 1, no. 42

Letter 4

پسم الله الحج الأَّلَّي 1r

من عبد بابکم ماتيوس ابساندر برست جوان الي مولانا
للسلطان مونويل نصره الله تعالى احلكم ما مولانا من جناب
قطعمر البشوارق سافروا معه الي البحر الاحمر الي جده
والي عدن وكمران ولا أعطاني راز ولا جامكية وصلنا الي باب
الحبشة اني بره بإست جوان وقتله له سير الي مصوع مثل
ما قال للسلاطين عمر قبتي في مصوع قال ليش وبعد ارج

إلى جده ضع مالك وضع عسكر ورد الي كمران فقالت له
في كمران قوم تمشي الى مصوع مثل ما قال للسلاطين ليش

APPARATUS | 14 14 The end of the text was written in two lines vertically in the margin.

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been written on this.\textsuperscript{16} They said: ‘We only did what the Captain-Major (Ar. \textit{Qabiṭamūr}) ordered us to do’. We fled and went to the Captain-Major (Ar. \textit{Qabiṭamūr}). Three of them had died. I told the Captain-Major (Ar. \textit{Qabiṭamūr}): ‘Get up and (set sail) with (your) men to the gate of the King of Ethiopia!’ He rebuffed me: ‘I do not want to! Go alone wherever you want!’ in front of all the Portuguese. ‘I will not depart until I have served Sultan Manuel (Ar. \textit{Manūyīl}) and I brought him (back) the answer of the King of Ethiopia’. All he wants (to do) is to lie and foil. He is reluctant to give access to Ethiopia, because of Afonso de Albuquerque (Ar. \textit{Alfunsū al-Bakīrī}), the first Captain-Major (Ar. \textit{Qabiṭamūr}), because of Bernardim Freire (Ar. \textit{Barnad Fararī}) and because of Francisco Pereira (Ar. \textit{Afrīs Bararī}), the hypocrites who betrayed me at (your court) in Portugal (Ar. \textit{Bardūn}). He wants to make lies. Our Sovereign the Sultan, you are a saint (Ar. \textit{ṣanīfū}), you know everything, so do not listen to Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. \textit{Qabiṭamūr Labuṣuwāris}). He wants to kill me but God does not want that. Everything he writes to you is only lie. The \textit{mahnūr} does not feel ashamed. You are the Sultan of the World. My words that I send you, these are true speech.

1r \textbf{Letter 4 |} In the name of God the Living the Eternal,

from the servant of your door, Mateus, Ambassador of Prester John (Ar. \textit{anbaṣadūr Brist Ĝuwān}) to our Sovereign Sultan Manuel (Ar. \textit{Manūyīl}), may God Almighty help him.

I inform you about Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. \textit{Qabiṭamūr Labuṣuwāris}) (that) we travelled with him to the Red Sea, Jeddah, Aden, and Kamaran. He did not give me provision nor wage. We reached the gate of Ethiopia at the harbour (Ar. \textit{būrṭa})\textsuperscript{17} of Prester John (\textit{Brist Ĝuwān}). I told him: ‘Sail to Massawa, like ‘Umar Qasīl said to the Sultan in Massawa’.\textsuperscript{18} ‘Why?’, he replied. Then he went to Jeddah and wasted your money and your soldiers. Then he returned to Kamaran. In Kamaran I told him: ‘Stand up and go to Massawa as the Sultan said!’ ‘Why? I do not set off and I will not send anything. Nobody goes to Ethiopia’. I begged him: ‘For the sake of the Sultan! If you do not go yourself, send with me two Arabs, two

\textsuperscript{16} The meaning of this passage is obscure.

\textsuperscript{17} Here, Mateus employs the Portuguese word ‘porta’, rather than the Persian ‘bandar’ as he does elsewhere in his letters. It is unclear why he would switch terminology only in this one instance.

\textsuperscript{18} The meaning of this passage is obscure.
ما اسير ولا ارسل شيء ولا احدا يروح إلى الحبشة فلت له
براس السلطان ان كنت انت ما تروح ارسل معي اثنين عراب
والاثنين قربه واحد ناقوس واحد اركان واحد فراضي 15 واحد
ناس من اهل بدعان وحلي خليج للسلطان تتبنا عنده نيء
حينما اجنب لك الجواب من ملك الحبشة وكل اهل
مصور واهل الحبشة يعرفون بالرحام والفحس وسلطان
البر يحرم نكاش سلطان كبير من قارب برست جوان قال ليش
ما افعل ولا (الرسل) شئ انت روح في طريقك ابق تريد
من ربع تريد من برتو تردد من عدن قفلت انا ما معي طريق
من بلاد المسلمين الا من مصور غير ما معي طريق حتا اني
عند قال انزل من عدن وروح قلت ما انزل انا موت في
خدمت مولانا للسلطان متويل سرنا اليه هرمز ارسل الي
البطرون ومعه عسكر وقال انزل في الهرمز قلبت برس
السلطان ان ما انزل في الهرمز في بلاد المسلمين (ق) في بلاد
المورو ان موت كم سن تاكو والاحتل سن جوان تربد الحب
انا اتكمات معكم وموت ولا اروح من بلاد المسلمين اروح
الي الهند واجلس في كشي (2) الى حين يرف[...][السلطان
انكان يريد (...)[ان] للسلطان نصره الله فهو برست قبطمو
نصراي عاقل بوديمي الى الحبشة التي برست جوان وانكان
للسلطان ما يريد برديني الى بدعان اسرم واوشي من طريق
روما من اسكندريه اروح بلادي فجحب (3) عليه بالقوه الي
الهند معي في كشي البيت اسكن فيه متعني الجاميه وقد
بعت البس الذي معي كله واصرفه علي ما بقا معي شيء وانا
امس مولانا السلطان نصره الله ان كان تريد برست جوان
ارسل قبطمو نصراي عاقل بوديمي بلادي وانكان مولانا ما
لمع عرض في برست جوان ارسل لي الجواب ردني الي
بدعان اروح الي روما بوديني بلادي بحث سنمرا ويحقق

APPARATUS | 3 15 For

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crafts, one bell, one arkun, one far(ā)dī, one Portuguese. Keep the things of the Sultan by your side until I bring you the reply of the King of Ethiopia. Massawa’s inhabitants and the people of the Ethiopian shore, they all know you, and the monks, and the priests. The sultan of the land, Bāhr Nakāś (Ar. Bahr Nakās) is a great sultan, among the relatives of Prester John (Ar. Brīst Ĺūwān). He rebuked: ‘Why? I do not want to send (anyone). Go your (own) way wherever you want! By Rabī’ […] By Berbera19 […] By Aden […]’. I objected: ‘I have no way through the Muslim countries except to cross via Massawa. I have no way until Aden’. He suggested: ‘Get off in Aden and then go!’ I held on: ‘I do not get off. I will die in the service of our Sovereign Sultan Manuel (Ar. Manūyīl).’ We travelled to Hormuz. He sent to the governor (Ar. baṭrūn) with soldiers. He ordered: ‘Get off in Hormuz!’ I refused: ‘For the sake of the Sultan, I do not get off in Hormuz, in the country of the Muslims, in the country of the Moors (Ar. al-Mūrū).’ I (will) die like São Tiago (Ar. San Tiyākū) or like São João (Ar. San Ĺūwān). You want war? I will join you and die. I do not go by the countries of the Muslims. I go to India and stay in Cochin (Ar. Kušī) until the Sultan 1v […] if he wants […] | the Sultan, may God help him. He sends (to) the Captain-Major (Ar. Qabīṭamār) a clever Christian who guides me to Ethiopia to Prester John (Ar. Brīst Ĺūwān). If the Sultan does not want this, he sends me back to Portugal (Ar. Bardān). I will travel on the road to Rome (Ar. Rūmā) and via Alexandria I will go to my country’. He was forced (?) to India.21 In Cochin (Ar. Kušī) he refused me a house to live in. He forbade me wage. (Hence) I sold all my clothes (to cover) my expenses. I had nothing left. I ask you, our Sovereign the Sultan, may God help him, if you want Prester John (Ar. Brīst Ĺūwān), send (to) the Captain-Major (Ar. Qabīṭamār) a clever Christian who guides me to my country. If our Sovereign does not have a proposal to Prester John (Ar. Brīst Ĺūwān), mail me a reply and send me back to Portugal (Ar. Bardān). I go to Rome (Ar. Rūmā). He (?) guides me to my country. For the sake of Holy Mary (Ar. Sanmariyā), for the sake of the Spirit Xristos (Ar. al-Rūḥ Ḥrēsštūs) (sic), by the cross of Christ son of God, send me a reply. I am staying in India,

19 Close to the harbour of Zinǧibār in Yemen.
20 Portuguese mouro. The employment of this specific Portuguese ethnonym to describe the Muslims would suggest Mateus was specifically highlighting this statement to his Portuguese audience.
21 The meaning of this passage is unclear.
الروح حريصتكم وبحق صليب المسيح ابن الله ردني 
الجابر فاتي جالس في الهند لا أنا من أهل الموت ولا أنا 
من أهل الحياة وإن جميع ما قال لكم ورسل لكم البشوارص 
وكتب لكم كله كدب وتعلمو يا مولانا ما عمل هذه كله الا 
من جناب الغندي البكريكي وبريد يعمل كدب ووضع 
عسكرك وضع مالك وضع مراكب وإنا يا مولانا وما يريد 
يفتح باب الحرب وما أعرف هذه من السلطان(ن) الذي هذه 
عدو الصليب وانت يا مولانا عقلت كل الهندية. وانت 
سلطان نصف البهاريا واخوك برست جوان سلطان نصف 
الهندية وإن اريد الالحاف هذه وافتح هذه الطريق وصاحب 
ينك وبين اخوك برست جوان والبشوارص ما يريد، وان جميع 
ما ارسل لك كدب وهو يريد لي الموت والله تعالى ما يريد 
وعد لي السحر واستفاني السم وما قدر ويريد يقننل المجر 
يفنان من مولاننا السلطان آخر من جناب صبيك الذي نصو قومو 
قد ارسله البشوارص إلى دهلك ونا تقيه في دهلك ونا في 
مركب ضن جوان في سن بطرس وهو في بر كشي ومعه 
قريه يريد بودي جوانسيس واحد عبد واحد مسلم قلت 
امشي الى مصوع يا حرفقو بندر ملك الحبشة هذه السلطان 
دهلك ساق كالم [...[ويفنلهم فقال [ [...[سيرق [...[يديلهم الورصو قومو صبيك وجاوني وقال انما اعمل لكل من الا 
الذي قال لي قطمصور البشوارص قلت قدام كاتيب القرره 
وقام معلم القرية18 براس السلطان ملون لا تنزل البر الي 
دهلك يقلنكم19 فما سمعه مني 20 وامام صبيك ديكو اومه 
وامال كاتيب القرهي21 الذي جانلي اليك هو علمكم بالكل 
وتكلم الذي جانلي اليك في المракب كلهم ويحلفكم

APPARATUS | 8 17 It is the spelling in this letter. 22 18 We read it misspelt القرهي 23 19 It is 
struck out because of a metathesis: يفتلكم | 20 We read vertically in the margin: وكمل صبيك 
ضيوكو اومه 24 21 We do not exclude in the last two lines a confusion between two close 
homographs. وشبهه. We maintain this in our translation.
between the dead and the living. Everything that Lopo Soares (Ar. \(Labušuwārīs\)) told you, sent you and wrote you, it is all lies. You know, our Sovereign, that he only did all that for Afonso de Albuquerque (Ar. \(Alfunsū\) \(al-Bakīrī\)). He wants to make lies, to waste your soldiers, your money, your ships. He does not want to open\(^{22}\) the gate to Ethiopia. I do not know if it is from the sultan who is the enemy of the cross. You, our Sovereign, understand the whole world. You are the Sultan of the half of the world. Your brother, Prester John (Ar. \(Brist\) \(Ǧuwān\)), is the Sultan of the (other) half of the world. I mean this half. I open the road. (I am) the friend between you and your brother Prester John (Ar. \(Brist\) \(Ǧuwān\)). Lopo Soares (Ar. \(Labušuwārīs\)) does not want (that). Everything he sent you is lie. He wants my death but God does not want it. He used witchcraft against me, he gave me poison to drink, (but) he did not prevail. He wants to kill me openly (with?) the servants of our Sovereign the Sultan. With respect to your fidalgo (Ar. \(sabīy\)) Lourenço do Carmo (Ar. \(Alwaranṣū\) \(Qūmū\)), Lopo Soares (Ar. \(Labušuwārīs\)) sent him to Dahlak. I met him in Dahlak, while I was on Dom João’s (Ar. \(Dūn\) \(Ǧuwān\)) ship, the Sāo Pedro (Ar. \(San\) \(Bītʀus\)). He was in the land of Cochin (Ar. \(Kušī\)) and has a craft. He wants to dispatch spies. One is a slave, one is a Muslim. I said: ‘Go to Massawa and to Arkiko, the harbour of the King of Ethiopia. This Sultan of Dahlak is a thief […] he steals […] he kills you […]’. He said ['…'] | Lourenço do Carmo (Ar. \(Alwaranṣū\) \(Qūmū\)), your fidalgo (Ar. \(sabīy\)), and they brought me. He objected: ‘I will only do of your words what Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. \(Qabiṭamūr\) \(Labušuwārīs\)) (orders’). I declared in front of the craft’s secretary and in front of the craft’s skipper: ‘For the sake of Sultan Manuel (Ar. \(Manīyīl\), do not go ashore in Dahlak, he will kill you!’ They did not listen to me. Ask your fidalgo (Ar. \(sabīy\)) Diego Jaume (Ar. \(Ḍūn\) \(Lūmah\)), ask the secretary in Arabic who came from me to you. He will inform you of everything. Talk to the ones who (return) to you on the ships. All of them, swear to you, report to you the true and exact (facts). As for me, our Sovereign, no one writes to me, Sultan of Portugal (Ar. \(Bardān\)),

\(^{22}\) The Arabic is ambiguous: \(yafṭaḥ\) means to open but also to conquer.
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يكلموك بالحق والصحيح وإنا يا مولانا ما احذا يكتب لي
سلطان بردعان كتب بالعربي وقال لهم المعين (٥) كتب الي
ابناشدر كتاب شفته (٥) وما احذا يكتب لي شي وصل لي
كتابين من مولانا السلطان ولكن مولانا في قلبي شي كثير ما
يوسعه الف كتاب إننا يا مولانا السلطان جالس في كتشي ما

عندى جامعك ولا عنى زاد وبعت ليسى وجميع ما معنى ما
عندى شي وايوب سل迒نشي ذالک٢٢ ومن جناب السلطان
ضونا مريا حرص جرا عظيم الله تعالى يرحمها ويرد قلبكم وان
جميع بردعان يغضونو من جهت البشوارص ويخافو منه

ومن الهله ومن البرم واما يا مولانا يا عمل هله الا ضمن
جوان الذي كنت في مركبه سان بطرس فانه عمل في شي ما
عمله الفياظات الذي جت معهم إلى عندكم يا بردعان
هوى الذي عمل هله وقلت له في دهلك براس السلطان
امشي حنا تفتح الباب ويكملم بحر نكاش والرهاين الي حين

يجي قطبموم من جده فحالا ما احخد السلطان انا احده
قطموم وسياي (١) وحلف ديكو أوه هذه يكلمل بالحق
وحلفه وفرحنا انه يعرف وكان معنا في المركب فانيا معنا من
قطموم (ر) في جده وانا اختدمت الي دهلك وانا ارويتهم
الطريق الي دهلك ولا ضاع المركب لكم (١) يا مولانا
السلطان ان (٥) بشري يسرا٢٣ تعظهم اعتقدي لوجه الله
تعالي صدقا عنكم في جواب سرعة بالدى يبهمكم الله تعالى

APPARATUS | 7 ٢٢ It reads إسراء٢٣ ذلالك ٢٠
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letters in Arabic. He (?) told them (?): ‘Who wrote to (the) Ambassador (Ar. anbaṣadūr) a letter I saw?’ No one writes to me anything. I received two letters from our Sovereign the Sultan.23 But, our Sovereign, in my heart there is so much that one thousand letters cannot retell. I am, our Sovereign the Sultan, staying in Cochin (Ar. Kušī). I have no wage, I have no provisions. I sold my clothes and everything I possess. I have nothing. I kiss the sword of the Prince (Ar. al-brinsī) and from her Majesty the Sultana Dona Maria (Ar. Ḱūnā Mariyā), may God Almighty grant her a magnificent reward (?), may He have mercy on her,24 may He refresh your heart. The whole of Portugal (Ar. Bardān) hates me because of Lopo Soares (Ar. Labušuwāris), they are scared of him, of his family and of (his) stories (? al-barm).25 Our Sovereign, this is all the work of Dom João (Ar. Ḱūn ḡuwwān), whose ship, the São Pedro (Ar. Sān Bīṭrūs), I was on. He did things that the captains with whom I came to you in Portugal (Ar. Bardān) (even) did not do. He made this all. I told him in Dahlak: ‘For the sake of the Sultan, go until you open the gate!’ and he (should) speak to the Bāḥr Nagās (Ar. Bahr Nakāš) and the monks until the Captain-Major (Ar. Qabīṭamūr) arrives from Jeddah. He replied: ‘I do not serve the Sultan, I serve (my) Captain-Major (Ar. Qabīṭamūr) and lord (?: Ar. sāyīd)!’26 The same Diego Jaume swore he would tell you the truth, he admitted that he knows. He was with us on the ship. We were with the Captain-Major (Ar. Qabīṭamūr) in Jeddah. I took them to Dahlak and I showed them the road to Dahlak otherwise the ship would have gotten lost for you. Our Sovereign the Sultan, you buy captives to free them; free me for the sake of God Almighty, as a charity from you, in a fast answer with what God Almighty will inspire you.

23 The meaning of this passage is obscure. We can only understand the broad complaint.
24 News of Dona Maria’s death on 7 March 1517 does not appear to have reached Mateus when he wrote this letter.
25 Persian word meaning ‘memory’. In this context, it would appear to represent the stories Lopo Soares had been supposedly spreading about Mateus.
26 This would appear to be a misspelling of سيد ‘lord’.
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Fig. 3 Letter 1, 1r: ANTT, Colecção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 39
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Fig. 4 Letter 1, 1v: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 39
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Fig. 5 Letter 2, 1r: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 40
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Fig. 6 Letter 2, 1v: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 40
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Fig. 7 Letter 3, 1r. ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 41
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Fig. 8 Letter 3, 1v: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 41
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Fig. 9 Letter 4, 1r: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 42
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Fig. 10 Letter 4, 1v: ANTT, Colecção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 42
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Fig. 11 Letter 4, 2r: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 42
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— 1506. *Gesta proxime Portugalenses in India, Ethiopia et aliis orientalibus terris* (Roma: Impressum per Joannem Besicken, 1506).


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— 1541. Fides, religio, moresque Aethiopum sub Imperio Pretiosi Ioannis (quem vulgo Presbyterum Ioannem vocant) de gentium, una cum narratione confederationis ac amicitiae inter ipsos Aethiopum Imperatores, & Reges Lusitiae initae (Parisis: Apud Christianum Wechelum, 1541).


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Summary

The relationship between Ethiopia and Prester John, the mythical ruler from the East searched for by the Latin Christians of Europe since the twelfth century, is long established in scholarship for the period between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. This relationship, however, appears one sided in the surviving source corpus with no reference to Prester John found in any Ge’ez texts. Indeed, the Ethiopian monks at the Council of Florence in 1441 were recorded as actively rejecting such an association between this Prester John and their ruler to the Latin Christians. The absence of Ge’ez sources aside, this article presents an edition and translation of four letters written in Arabic by the Ethiopian ambassador to Lisbon between 1509 and 1520, Mateus, to Dom Manuel, King of Portugal, which present him as the anbašadūr Brist Guwān and pose further questions for this discussion. The letters provide examples of a counter narrative to the outright dismissal of the myth by the monks at Florence. With only one known clear proponent of each stance, and in different centuries, the discussion concerning Ethiopia’s rejection of the Prester John myth may require more nuance.