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ADAM SIMMONS, Nottingham Trent University
SÉBASTIEN GARNIER, CNRS

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When Prester John Actually Ruled Ethiopia, 1509–1520*

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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.¹ 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 Euro-centric scholarship, particularly for their importance in any discussion regarding the Ethiopian association with Prester John.² 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 Gə'əz 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.

ous 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'.³ 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 *Mātiyūs anbašādūr Brist Ġuwān* (ماتئوس انبشادور برست جوان).⁴ 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.⁵ Besides the evidence of absence within the Gə'əz 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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 *rasūl*, *qāšid*, or *safr*, is significant and will be discussed below.

⁵ Krebs 2020.

⁶ Nogara 1927, 23.

⁷ Derat 2012, 133-139; Giardini 2019.

Prester John played no role in comparative Ethiopian discourse.⁸ 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.⁹ 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*'.¹⁰ 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 Şaggā Za'ab, the Ethiopian ambassador to Lisbon sent by 'Aşe Ləbna Dəngəl in which we do have more information. Despite the absence of Prester John in Ləbna Dəngəl's own correspondence with Latin Christians, in Lisbon Şaggā Za'ab informed Damião 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.¹¹ In the first edition, published in Leuven in 1540, Damião 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 Şaggā Za'ab's direction, he posited that Prester John should actually be called *Ioannes Preciosus* because in Gə'əz it is *Ioannes Belul* or *Ioannes Encoe*, which he says meant 'precious' or 'high'.¹² The Gə'əz names given by de Góis—*ጸንጽ ብሉሉ* (*Bəlul*) and *ጸንጽ ስንቁ* (*Ḥnqʷ*)—should actually translate via the Portuguese conflation of *ጸን*

⁸ Derat 2012, 139.

⁹ Krebs 2020.

¹⁰ Azevedo 1915–1934, II, 357.

¹¹ For Ləbna Dəngəl's letter, see: Sergew Hable Selassie 1974, 558–564.

¹² The Latin text reads: 'Scribitur enim nostro sermone his characteribus ጸንጽ ብሉሉ quod sonat Ioannes Belul, hoc est, Ioannes Preciosus, sive Altus: & in Chaldaica lingua sie scribitur ጸንጽ ስንቁ quod est, Ioannes Encoe, id si interpreteris, etiam Ioannis Preciosi sive Alti significantum habet' ('It is written in our language with these characters ጸንጽ ብሉሉ which sounds like Ioannes Belul, that is, Ioannes Preciosus (Precious), or High: and in the Chaldaic language it is written ጸንጽ ስንቁ, 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, ‘*Inq*’ represents de Góis’ definition of ‘precious’, *Bəlul* would instead be expected to read *lə’ul* (ለኩል), ‘high’, and then therefore raises the possibility of a printing error given the similar letter forms. The presence of *Bəlul* has been explained by the phrase *Bəlul kōy*, ‘my pupil’ (ብሉል፡ኸይ), which appears alongside *žan kōy*, ‘my king’ (ገን፡ኸይ), 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 *Bəlul* in de Góis’ appellation actually translates as ‘pupil’ and not ‘high’ as de Góis had claimed.¹³ However, de Góis claimed that all Gə‘əz words in his text were signed off by Šaggā Za’ab (labelled as ‘the Orator’) himself, posing the possibility that even if *Bəlul* was intended, Šaggā Za’ab would appear to have given a different definition to de Góis in order to marry the Gə‘əz appellation and the European narrative if, indeed, *Bəlul* was not instead employed as a metaphor for ‘high’.¹⁴ Moreover, as noted by Jeremy Lawrance, the *Legatio David 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 Šaggā 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.¹⁵ Despite the absence of Prester John in Ethiopian sources and surviving correspondence between Ethiopian *nagašt* and Latin Christian rulers, Mateus’ letters provide non-exogenous evidence that at least some Ethiopian ambassadors, such as himself, Šaggā 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 Šaggā 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’, *E Ae*, V (2014), 138b–140b (A. Bausi); Ludolfi 1691, 222.

¹⁴ Góis 1541, 94.

¹⁵ Anon. 1513; Lawrance 1992, 313.

The 1509–1520 Embassy

'*Ītege* 'Ēleni, who was acting as co-regent for the then minor Ləbna Dəngəl, sent Mateus to lead an embassy to Lisbon in 1509.¹⁶ According to surviving copies of Ēleni'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 Mamlūk 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 Yā'qob, who was seemingly from the Ethiopian nobility.²⁰ In one of his letters (no. 39), however, Mateus refers to Yā'qob as 'my son' (*waladī*), implying that Yā'qob 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 Yā'qob was born to a union between an Ethiopian woman and Mateus. Any links to Yā'qob's supposed nobility are not made in the letters. In addition to Mateus and Yā'qob, the embassy did contain others, too. It was reported that the total number of the

¹⁶ *Nəguś* Nā'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 '*Ītege* 'Ēleni until he reached the age of maturity at 20.

¹⁷ João 'the priest', João Gomes, and Sidī Muḥammad.

¹⁸ At least two copies are known. A copy of Ēleni's letter which was said to have originally been located in Shewa was published by Sergew Hable Selassie: Sergew Hable Sellassie 1974, 554–558. Another copy, found in a c. sixteenth- or seventeenth-century manuscript currently held at the Qarānyo Mādḥane 'Ālam Church in Goḡḡām, MS G1-IV-301, ff. 102v–103r, appears to have circulated in different manuscript networks and was not seemingly known to Sergew Hable Selassie during his publication of the other: Sergew Hable Sellassie 1974, 565. In both manuscripts, Ēleni's letter is immediately followed by '*Aṣe* Ləbna Dəngəl'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. Yā'qob appears to also be referred to as Pē[t]ros in a much later Ethiopian source: Sergew Hable Sellassie 1974, 552.

group who arrived in Goa on its outward journey was twelve: Mateus, Yā‘qob, two women (Mateus’ wife and another),²¹ and eight, possibly enslaved, servants.²² 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.²³

The embassy was widely epitomised by mistrust and suspicion by the Portuguese despite Albuquerque’s welcome hospitality. Both Mateus and Yā‘qob 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.²⁴ 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 *nəguś* with the arrival of Mateus in Lisbon.²⁵ Equally, no such suspicion appears to have been held by Manuel, who bestowed upon both Mateus and Yā‘qob a knighthood of the Order of Christ on 2 April 1515, five days prior to their departure from Lisbon.²⁶ 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 Yā‘qob’s mother is unclear. The other woman may have been Yā‘qob’s wife but could equally have been another female relative or companion.

²² Aubin 1976, 23.

²³ Bulhão Pato 1884–1935, I, 381–384.

²⁴ Albuquerque 1576, 445.

²⁵ Bulhão Pato 1884–1935, I, 312–318.

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.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. 39.²⁸

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 *Carta das novas*, upon arrival Mateus was confirmed as the ambassador of Ethiopia and as 'our father Mateus' by the Ethiopians.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 (Hərgigo), the Ethiopian satellite port of Massawa to its south. Following Mateus' death, the Portuguese continued to address Ləbna Dəngəl as Prester John, but received no similar responses from within Ethiopia akin to those of Mateus during his embassy that the *nəguś* was indeed Prester John as far as the surviving sources reveal.

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 *Ityūbyā*³⁰ or *al-Habaša*,³¹ neither of which appear in any of the letters' openings, though *al-Habaša* 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 *al-Habaša*, further highlighting the significance of the toponym's absence in his

²⁷ Mateus' letters tell us he stayed at Cochin during this period.

²⁸ The death of Yā'qob is recorded in a letter dated 11 December 1515: Bulhão Pato 1884–1935, III, 169–170.

²⁹ Thomas and Courtesão 1938, 39.

³⁰ Or an equivalent spelling based on the Gə'əz *Ityōṗya*, which was the preferred way for Ethiopians to refer to their kingdom to a Latin Christian audience.

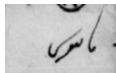
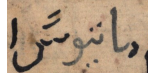
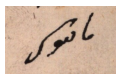
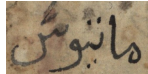
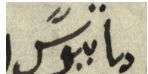
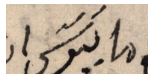
³¹ The historical Arabic toponym for the Ethiopian kingdom remained still in use within Ethiopia until the turn of the twentieth century prior to the adoption of the modern Arabic toponym *Aiyūbyā*, even appearing alongside the Gə'əz *Ityōṗya* which had otherwise long been adopted internally since the fourteenth century. For an example of the Ethiopian employment of both *Ityōṗya* and *al-Habaša* as late as the nineteenth century, see the royal seals of Tēwodros 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 *Dūn Ġuwān* 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', Yā'qob, 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 Cochinchina 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.³³

see Fig. 1		see Fig. 3, letter 1 (no. 39)	
see Fig. 2		see Fig. 5, letter 2 (no. 40)	
		see Fig. 7, letter 3 (no. 41)	
		see Fig. 9, letter 4 (no. 42)	

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* (*anbašadūr*) 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.

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.³⁴ Mateus also consistently employs the Arabic transliteration of other Portuguese titles, such as *al-brinsī* (*príncipe*), *ḏūn* (*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 *sabiy* ('boy/son') in place of the Portuguese title *fidalgo*—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 (*būrta/porta*, no. 42), when he had previously been using the Persian word *bandar* in his other letters to denote the Ethiopian harbour at Arkiko (Ḥərgigo). 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.³⁵ 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 *anbašādūr Brist Ğuwān, malik al-Ḥabaša*' (من ماتيوس انبشادور برست جوان ملك الحبشة)³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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 Portugalenses 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*.

³⁷ See Thomaz 1990; Thomaz 1991; Humble 2000.

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.³⁸ 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 áquella ora que o Prestes João 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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 Gə'əz, would appear to be the closest thing to Ethiopian evidence to accompany the Latin Christian textual corpus which Matteo Salvatore 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.⁴³ 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 Yā'qob'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.⁴⁴ 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, Şaggā Za'ab, described Mateus as an Armenian (*natione armenicus*).⁴⁵ However, Mateus alludes himself to being an Egyptian. Both in his letters and commented on by Portuguese sources, he described himself as the brother ('*aḳū*) of the *abun* (or *al-baṭriyārki* 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.⁴⁶ For instance, it should be emphasised that Mateus also employs the

⁴¹ Lawrance 1992, 321.

⁴² Krebs 2021, 144-145.

⁴³ Salvatore 2017, 60.

⁴⁴ Correia 1860-1861, II, 325.

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 *ʾakū* when he refers to Prester John being the metaphorical brother of Dom Manuel (no. 42). Ethiopian sources are equally unhelpful. Ēleni'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.⁴⁷ Somewhat confusingly and without precedent, the nineteenth-century *Goḡḡām Chronicle*, which was compiled from earlier manuscripts, even describes Mateus, who is named as Malṭos, as 'German' (*ya-garmānyā*, ገርማኛ).⁴⁸ 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 Ləbna Dəngəl 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.⁴⁹ 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 Ləbna Dəngəl following Mateus' death.

Whatever the case, the only thing that may be said is that Mateus was seemingly not an Ethiopian himself.⁵⁰ 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,⁵¹ 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' (أيش) and 'why' (لش)—both are also not the common forms used in Egypt—are not employed using Egyptian syntax, and

⁴⁷ Sergew Hable Sellassie 1974, 555, 557.

⁴⁸ Sergew Hable Sellassie 1974, 552.

⁴⁹ Alvares 1889, 186.

⁵⁰ Aubin 1976, 24–28.

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 *ى*, such as in *الي* and *علي*, while interdental graphemes *ث ذ* are not always dotted.

neither is his future tense, which is formed via the prefix ح , rather than the more common ° 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 Gə'əz material, cannot be maintained. Current evidence does not allow us to suggest whether the letters were reflective of a wider, and notably otherwise unevicenced, 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 *nəguś* 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 Ləbna Dəngəl 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 *nagaśt* 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 Gə'əz . 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.

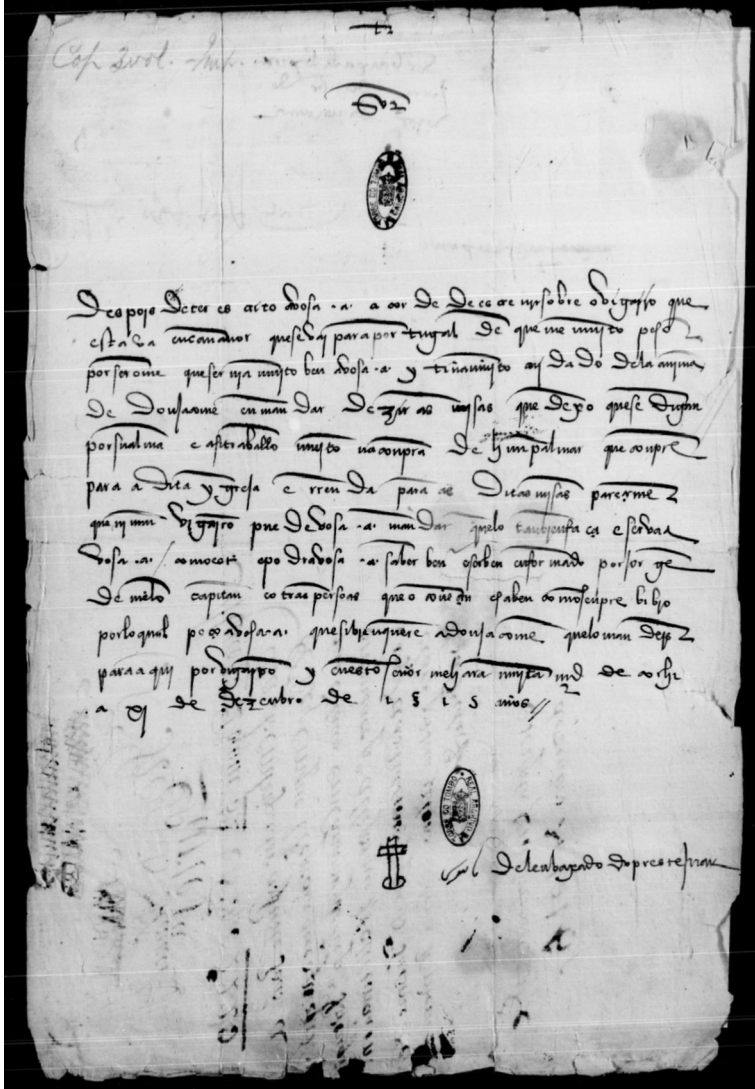


Fig. 1 An example of Mateus' signature on a Portuguese letter dated 11 December 1515. ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, Parte I, mc. 19, n.º 52. © Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo

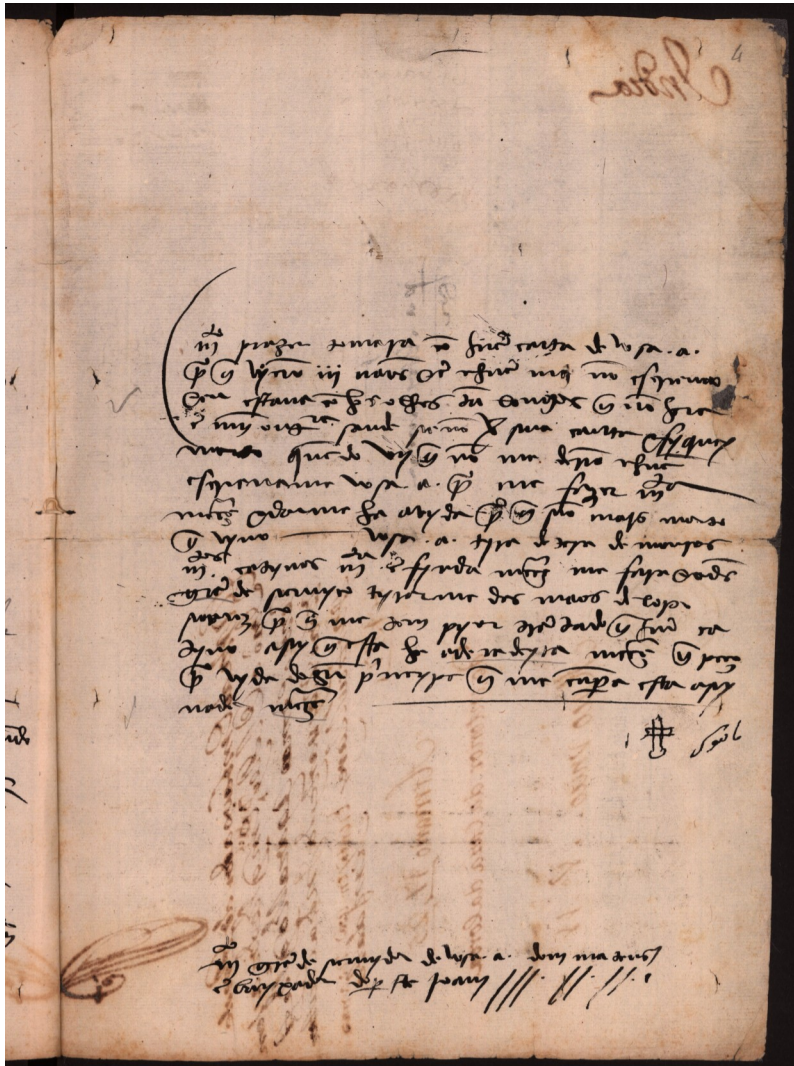


Fig. 2 An example of Mateus' signature on a Portuguese letter written in 1517. ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 876, n.º 11, 4r. ©Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo

Editions and Translations¹ of the Letters

ANNT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 39

Letter 1 | [بسم الله الح] ي الازلي

1r

من عبد بابكم ماتيوس انباشدر برست جوان الي مولانا
5 للسلطان¹ منوييل نصره الله اعلمكم يا مولانا من حين
فارقتكم من بردعان الي هذه الحين في عذاب شديد من
قبطمور لبشوارص فانه يعذب في ويسقيني السم ويعمل
السحر ويريد يقتلني ومنعني الجامكيه ومنعني الاكل والشرب
ويريد قتلي والله تعالى ما يريد وقد قتل جاكمه وحيسه في
10 المركب خمسه عشر يوم في باب كوكه حتا مات في الب(بحر)
اخذته ميت في المركب الي كنوك نور وقبرته وعملت له كل
شي وقد ارسلت وعرفتكم بهذه قبل عشرين وثلاثين كتاب
وبعد جلست في الهند سنة ونصف في كشي وبعد قام
سافر² الي البحر الاصفر الي جده وارمالي في مركب اسمه
15 سان بطرس وقبطانه³ اسمه ضون جوان ولا اعطاني لا زاد ولا
اكل ولا شرب وانا بعث البس الذي اعطاني مولانا للسلطان
جميعه واشترت فيه الزاد واكل وشرب وقال قبطمور
البشوارص ما قدرنا عليه بالسم ولا قدرنا عليه بالسحر نقله
بالجوع ولعطش وان وقبطان ضون جوان عمل شي معي امر
20 وانحس ما عملو في القبطانات الذي جابوني عندكم الي
بردعان وان يا مولانا) للسلطان فبظمور البشوارص لمن (؟)
مشا الي جده المركب الذي اسمه سان بطرس الذي انا فيه
ربط عليه مركب اسمه الزنكي وضعنا من المراكب في باب

APPARATUS | 5¹ We read reiterated vertically in the margin: من ماتيوس انباشدر برست جوان . ملك الحبشه . قباته . 14² He corrects above the incorrect . صا . 15³ He corrects above the incorrect .

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.

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.) *Anbašadūr Brist Ğuwān*) to our Sovereign Sultan Manuel (Ar. *Manūyīl*), may God Almighty help him.

I inform you from the moment I bid you farewell in Portugal (Ar. *Bard'ān*),¹ (I was subject) to very bad treatment from Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr Labušuwärīš*):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 Ğākimah (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 São Pedro, whose captain is called Dom João (Ar. *Dūn Ğuwān*). 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 Labušuwärīš*) said: 'We could not kill him neither with poison nor with witchcraft. We will kill him with hunger and thirst'. Captain Dom João (Ar. *Dūn Ğuwān*) did me such bitter and miserable things that do not (even) compare to the captains who took me to you in Portugal (Ar. *Bard'ān*). Our Sovereign the Sultan, Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr Labušuwärīš*) when he went to Jeddah, the ship whose name is São Pedro (Ar. *Sān Biṭrus*) 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 Índias* 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 (برتقال), 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 وغرق المركب الزنكى وضربهم الريح وما يعرف المعلم
 اين يروح فقلت لهم امشو بر الحبشه انا اوديكم ونرسل الي
 ملك الحبشه الجواب وكتاب السلطان منوييل قالو مليح
 وصلو الي دهلك ولقو الاكل والغنم والما وقلت لضون جوان
 5 جلست في دهلك أربعة عشرين نهار ايش جالس تعمل قوم
 امشي مصوع وحررقو بندر ملك الحبشه وقلت له براس
 فقال(ل) انا ما اخدم السلطان انا خدم [...] | للسلطان منوييل
 للسلطان وبعد جانا من قبطمور اثنين قريه(يه) [...] وفيها
 الونصو قرمو صبي للسلطان ولقونا في دهلك وقلنا لهم في
 10 (ايش جيتو) وقالو ارسلنا قبطمور البشوارص الي دهلك نبيع
 الفلفل والبهار وتنتصالح مع صاحب دهلك وقبطمور ارسل
 معنا واحد يهودي واحد عبد واحد كرلكو قسد(بي)س نعطيهم
 لصاحب دهلك يوديهم لنا الي الحبشه وقلت لهم الحبشه ما
 يدخلهم جاسوس فقالو امشي معنا حانئص وقلت لهم انا
 15 اودي لكم صبيانكم واعملك من جهتي واعطيهم الي الرهبان
 والي البحر سان (؟) الذي في بندر الملك الحبشه واما من
 امر سلطان انا ما اروح وكلمهم قدام كل الذي مركب ضون
 جوان وضحكو علي وقالو مليح مشينا الي دهلك قلت لهم لا
 تدخلو دهلك ولا تنزلو هذه سارق وهذه كل يوم يسرق
 20 الحبوس والحريستان و(بي)بيع وهذه مسلم وهذه كافر وهوه
 جالس في هذه الجزيره ولا يقدر عليه برست جوان روحو الي
 مصوع والي حررقو الي بندر الملك في الرهاب وفيه النصارا
 وفيه الحريسان وفيه الذي يعرفونا قال لا نريد الا الذي امرنا
 قبطمور البشوارص ونزلو لا سيف ولا حربيه وقتلوهم وكتب
 25 عليهم شهود أصحاب القرطليتي وهذه كله حق وجميع ما
 يقول لكم قبطمور البشوارص جميعه كله كذب وانتو تعرفو يا
 مولا(نا) للسلطان انه يريد قتلي من جناب الالفنشو البكيريكي
 ومن جناب برند فررى ويريد يعمل هذه كله كذب ولا يريد

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. *Manūyīl*). They said ‘Fine!’. They reached Dahlak. They found food, cattle, and water. I said to Dom João (Ar. *Ḍūn Ğuwān*): ‘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
 1v Sultan Manuel (Ar. *Manūyīl*)!’ | He replied: ‘I do not serve the Sultan, I serve [...]’ the Sultan. Then two crafts came to us sent from the Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*) [...] on her was Lourenço do Carmo (Ar. *Alwanṣū Qarmū*), fidalgo (Ar. *sabiy*)⁴ of the Sultan. They found us in Dahlak and we told them: ‘What made you come here?’. They replied: ‘Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr Labuṣuwāriṣ*) 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. *Qabiṭamūr*) sent with us one Jew, one slave, one *krkw*(?)⁵—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. *ṣibiyānakum*) (the way) with my guidance, and entrust them to the monks, to the *Baḥr 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. *Ḍūn Ğuwān*). 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 Ğuwān*) 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 Naḡāš*. However, given Mateus’ correct use of the title *Bāḥr Naḡāš* (Ar. *Baḥr 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*)*ḥrīs(ti)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 الحبشه ورديت الي كمران الي عند قبطمور فقلت
له قوم ارسل معي اثنين عيسا (؟) واثنين قريه وخلي جميع
حوايح السلطان وارسل معي اثنين فراضى وارسل معي واحد
اركن واحد مسيحي وانا امشي اجيب لكم الجواب من ملك
5 الحبشه قال لا ما اريد انت روح لك من بلاد المسلمين من
اين ما تريد قلت له انا ما معي طريق الا مصوع والا من
بردعان والا اجلس في الهند الي حين يجي جواب مولانا
السلطان ايش ما اراد يفعل في حكم السلطان طاعه وانا
جالس في الهند ابصر جواب مولانا للسلطان وان ما بقا معي
10 اكل 4 ولا اشرب ولا البس وقد راح مالي وراح مرتي وراح
ولدى جاكمه وانا جالس لا مال ولا جامكيه ولا يعطي شي
البشوارص وانتو يا مولانا السلطان تعرفو كل شي

ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 40

بسم الله الحي الازلي | Letter 2

1r

15 من عبد بابكم ماتيوس انباشدر برست جوان الي مولانا
للسلطان منوييل⁵ نصره الله سلطان للدنيا صالح بين
السلطين اعلمكم يا مولانا من جناب قبطمور الي(شوارص)
(من) حين فارقتكم في عذاب ويسقيني السم [...] السحر
يريد يقتلني (والله ما يريد) ومنعني الجامكيه ولا اكل ولا
20 شرب ولا لبس وكل يوم (قال) لي الكلام القبيح وقد اخذني
معه الي البحر الاحمر وراح الي جدا (= جددة) ورد مثل
اليهودي وانا في مركب سان بطرس وقبطان المركب ضون

APPARATUS | 10⁴The end of the text is written vertically in the margin on two lines. 16⁵We read reiterated vertically in the margin: انباشدر ماتيوس برست جوان.

Major Lopo Soares (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr Labuṣuwāriṣ*) has ordered us'. They got off without swords nor weapons, and they were killed by them. The friends of al-Qrtlyī (?)⁸ wrote testimonies about them. All this is true. Everything that Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr Labuṣuwāriṣ*) tells you, everything is only lie. You know, our Sovereign the Sultan, that he wants to kill me because of Afonso de Albuquerque (Ar. *Alfunsū al-Bakīrkī*) 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 *farādī*,⁹ send with me one *arkun*,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. *Bard'ān*), 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 Ğākimah (Yā'qob). I stay without money or wages: Lopo Soares (Ar. *Labuṣuwāriṣ*) does not give anything. You, our Sovereign the Sultan, know everything.

1r **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 Labuṣuwāriṣ*) 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 Biṭrus*). The captain of the ship is Dom João (Ar. *Ḍūn Ğuwān*). He did

⁸ القرتليتي: 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 عملو في برند فررى وافريس برري
ومنعوني الاكل والشرب وقالو حتا يموت ومن جناب الونصو
قومو الذي قتلوهم في دهلك فقلت لهم لا تدخلو دهلك
امشو الي مصوع الي بلاد الحرتيسان الذي يعرفونا ونرسل لكم
5 صبيانكم الي عند ملك الحبشه قالو لا ما نعمل الا الذي قال
لنا قبطومور وحلفتهم براس منوييل وبراس ملك الحبشه وباسم
الرب لا تدخلو الي دهلك هذه بلاد سراق وحرامي كل يوم
يسرق من خرستيان من الحبوس ويـ(يـ)ع ما رضو وبعد
كلمت قبطومور في كمران امشي الي مصوع او الي بندر
10 ملك الحبشه اسمه حرققو وكل النصرارى (كذا) والرهبان
يعرفونا وتمشو حوايجكم ونطلع الحبشه ونرد الجواب على
للسلطان منوييل قال لا ما اريد ولا افتح باب الحبشه
والحبشه ما هم نصرانيه وقال روح انت الي بلاد المسلمين
اين تريد قلت انا ما معي طريق الا مصوع والا تردني الهند
15 حتا يرد جواب للسلطان ا منوييل انكان يريد الجواب من
ملك الحبشه يرسل مراكب وقبطمور رجل عاقل يودينا الي
بندر ملك الحبشه وانكا السلطان منوييل ما يريد فهو يرد
الجواب على انباشدر ويقول لي روح اين ما تريد فذاك الحين
الله تعالي يفتح لي طريق امشي فيه والا يردني الي عنده اعمل
20 فراضي اخدم الرب وان يا مولانا للسلطان (كذا) ما معي
شي لا اكل ولا (اشرب) وبعد لبسي وحوايجي علي الزاد
وعلي الاكل والشرب وصدقه علي قبر جاكمه وما معي شي
اصرف علي نفسي حتا او (الي) بلادي ان يا مولانا للسلطان
انت صالح بين الصلاطين (كذا) وترسل تشتري اليسرا من
25 بلاد المسلمين وتعتقهم خلصني وارسل لي الجواب اما اي
اما لا صدقا عن ولدك البرينشي وانا جالس في الهند الي
حين يجيني الجواب من مولانا للسلطان رضى الله تعالي وان
يا مولانا لا تامن كلام قبطومور ان جميع ما يقوله كله كذب

in jail what Bernardim Freire and Francisco Pereira (Ar. *Barnad Fararī wa-Afrīs Bararī*) 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. *Alwanṣū Qūmū*) 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. *ṣibiyānakum*) to the King of Ethiopia’. They objected: ‘No, we only do what the Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*) tells us’. I swore to them: ‘For the sake of Manuel (Ar. *Manūyīl*) 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. *Qabiṭamūr*) 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. *Manūyīl*)’. 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
1v (from) Sultan| Manuel (Ar. *Manūyīl*). If he wants a letter from the King of Ethiopia, he (will) send ships. The Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*) is a clever man. He will guide us to the harbour of the King of Ethiopia. If Sultan Manuel (Ar. *Manūyīl*) 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 Ğākimah (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-brinsī*)! 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. *Qabiṭamūr*). Everything he says, it is all lies. You know about Captain-Major Afonso de Albuquerque (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr Alfunsū al-Bakṛkī*) and

وانتو تعرفو من جناب قبطور الفنشو البكيركي ومن جناب
برند فرري انه ما يريد لي خير وحلفته انتو يا مولانا علي
برست منا جي وما عمل برست منا جي مثل الريح والامثل
الخرأ ومثل الكلب يكفي يا مولانا انتو تعرفو كل شي
5 والمجنون ما عليه حرج العقال في هذه الزمان ما تنفع تنفع
المجانين الذي يسوطو ويطلع المامو(ن) ثمهم ويعيطو مثل
الغنم وما يعرفو الله تعالى⁶ والله تعالى يصلح الامر ويلهمك
الي الخير امين

ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 41

بسم الله الحي الازلي⁷ | Letter 3

1r

من عبد بابكم ماتيوس انباشدر برست جوان الي مولانا
للسلطان منوييل نصره الله تعالى اعلمكم من حين فارقتكم
من بردعان في عذاب شديد من قبطمور البشوارص هو يريد
15 قتلي والله ما يريد وقد منعني الجامكيه ولا اكل ولا شرب وقد
بعث جميع ما معي علي الاكل والشرب وما بقا معي شي
وقد اخذني معه الي جده الي البحر الاحمر ولا مصروف ولا
اكل ولا شرب وحطني في مركب سان بطرس وناخذته اسمه
ضون جوان وكان معنا مربوط مركب اسمه الزنكي وعلي باب
20 جده⁸ معنا من المراكب وغرق الزنكي وما عرفنا اين راح
قبطمور والمراكب فماتو من العطش⁹ العسكر والمعلم ما
يعرف اين يروح ورا دو يرمو بالمركب علي البر انا يا مولانا
اخذتهم الي دهلك واريوتهم الطريق الي بر الحبشه وقلت الي
ضون جوان قبطان المركب براس السلطان منوييل امشي الي
25 مصوع الي بندر ملك الحبشه نصف نهار قال ما اريد اخدم

APPARATUS | 7⁶ The word is difficult to read. 11⁷ We read reiterated vertically in the margin: ماتيوس انباشدر برست جوان. 20⁸ It reads خده however. 21⁹ العطش.

about Bernardim Freire (Ar. *Barnad Fararī*). (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 Ğuwān*) 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’ān*), (I was subject) to very bad treatment from Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr Labušuwärīš*). 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 São Pedro (Ar. *Sān Biṭrus*). Her pilot’s name was Dom João (Ar. *Dūn Ğuwān*). 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 João (Ar. *Dūn Ğuwān*), 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 Labušuwärīš*)’. 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.

السلطان انا اخدم قبطمور البشوارص بعد حتى أربعة وعشرين
نهار نهب دهلك واخذ غنمها وبقرها وقتل واحد قلت ليش
تعمل هذه وسلطان دهلك عرفني اني اخو البطرياركي وبعد
أربعة وعشرين نهار ما نعرف قبطمور ولا المراكب اين راحت
5 وبعد جانا من كرات (؟) قريبتين¹⁰ مركبين من عند قبطمور
في الواحد الصغير الورنصو قرمو صبي السلطان وقلنا لهم في
ايش جيتو فقالو ارسلنا قبطمور الي دهلك ومعهم واحد عبد
واحد يهودي واحد كرالكو محنور (؟) وقالو لي يا ابناشدر
تعال امشي معنا فقلت مرحبا حليت حوايجي وعبيدي في
10 مركب ضون جوان وقلت لهم امشو الي مصوع الي حرقو
بندر ملك الحبشه فيه نصارا وفيه رهبان وفيه قسوس وفيه الذي
يعرفونا فقالو مليح وضون جوان حلف لي اني جالس جنب
دهلك الي حين ما تيجي | المركبين وتودو خبر وتحبو¹¹ خبر
والذي يعرفون¹² من النصارا واهل الحبشه بعد بكره من
15 الصبح ه ساقو (؟) المركب الي كمران ونحنا والونصو قرمو
(؟) اخذونا الي دهلك وقلت لهم ليش تفعلو هذه اول اخرب
دهلك ضون جوان وصاحب دهلك¹³ حرامي وسارق واخربتو
بلاده ايش تعملو عنده هذه كل يوم يرق الحبوس ويبيع ما
سمعو مني دخلو وضحك عليهم وقال لهم انا ما حبكم الذي
20 تريدو ءانا افعل لكم وقالوله هذه ابناشدر مانا منه انت تودي
لنا هذه الثلاثة رجال الي عند ملك الحبشه قالهم مرحبا
اعطي مركب من عندي واوديهم الي عند بحر نكاش من
سلاطين الحبشه قالو مرحبا وحلف لهم وهم اعطو له قماش
شي بمائة اشرفي ذهب وقال لهم اريد اقبالكم تعالو تنزلو الي
25 الساحل ولا تحملو سيف ولا حربة وانا اجي واتلاقا معكم
فقلت لهم لا شي قبطان براس السلطان منوييل براس ملك

iv

APPARATUS | 5¹⁰ قاريين. 13¹¹ ?تكتبو. 14¹² It reads يعرفو however. 17¹³ We read reiterated vertically in the margin: مرور وما لملك ملك الحبشه.

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-baṭriyārki*)?’ 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 *krālkw maḥnūr* (?).¹³ They added: ‘O Ambassador (Ar. *anbašadūr*), come and follow us!’. ‘For sure, I will!’. I left my things and my slaves on the ship of Dom João (Ar. *Ḍūn Ğuwān*). ‘(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 Ğuwān*) 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 Ğuwān*) 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. *anbašadūr*). 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) *Bāḥr Nagāš* (Ar. *Baḥr Nakāš*), one of the Ethiopian sultans’. ‘Thanks!’ they replied. He swore to them and they gave him fabric worth about one hundred *ašraḥf* 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

¹³ Possibly a reference to a *clérigo* (cleric). In letter no. 39 this individual is specifically identified as a priest (*qašīs*).

¹⁴ The syntax of the Arabic text here seems faulty.

¹⁵ The equivalent of c. 350 g.

الحبشه من شان الله لا تنزلو الي هده يقتلوكم وقالولي انت ما
تعرف شي هده صاحبنا وحلفنا معه وهده بودي لنا ناسنا الي
الحبشه وراحو وقتلوهم وما سمعو كلامي وكتب عليهم ورقه
بهده وقالو نحننا ما نعمل الا الذي قال لنا قبطمور وهربنا رحنا
5 الي عند قبطمور وماتو ثلاثه منهم وقلت الي قبطمور قوم انت
والمراكب والناس تروح الي باب ملك الحبشه قال انا ما اريد
انت روح لك في حالك اين ما تريد قدام كل بردعان فقلت
انا ما اروح حتا اخدم السلطان منوييل فارد له الجواب من
ملك الحبشه وكل هده يريد نفعل كذب ويبطل ولا يفتح
10 باب الحبشه من شان الفنشو البكيركي قبطمور الاول ومن
شان برند فررى ومن شان افريس برري النوايج الذي خانوني
الي عندك الي بردعان ويريد يعمل هده كذب ويا مولانا
السلطان انت صنطو وتعرف كل شي ولا تسمع كلام
قبطمور البشوارص فانه يريد قتلي فالله ما يريد¹⁴ وان جميع ما
15 يكتب لك كله كذب والمحنور ما عليه حرج وانت سلطان
الدينا وانا كلامي الذي ارسلت لكم كله قول صح

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

بسم الله الحي الازلي | Letter 4

1r

من عبد بابكم ماتيوس انباسدر برست جوان الي مولانا
20 للسلطان منوييل نصره الله تعالي اعلمكم يا مولانا من جناب
قبطمور البشوارص سافرنا معه الي البحر الاحمر الي جده
والي عدن وكرمان ولا اعطاني زاد ولا جامكيه وصلنا الي باب
الحبشه الي برطه برست جوان وقلت له سير الي مصوع مثل
ما قال للسلطان عمر قستيل في مصوع قال ليش وبعد راح
25 الي جده ضيع مالك وضيع عسكرك ورد الي كمران فقلت له
في كمران قوم تمشى الي مصوع مثل ما قال للسلطان ليش

APPARATUS | 14¹⁴ The end of the text was written in two lines vertically in the margin.

been written on this.¹⁶ They said: ‘We only did what the Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*) ordered us to do’. We fled and went to the Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*). Three of them had died. I told the Captain-Major (Ar. *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. *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. *Alfunsū al-Bakrīkī*), the first Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*), because of Bernardim Freire (Ar. *Barnad Fararī*) and because of Francisco Pereira (Ar. *Afrīs Bararī*), the hypocrites who betrayed me at (your court) in Portugal (Ar. *Bard‘ān*). He wants to make lies. Our Sovereign the Sultan, you are a saint (Ar. *ṣantū*), you know everything, so do not listen to Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr Labuṣuwāriṣ*). He wants to kill me but God does not want that. Everything he writes to you is only lie. The *maḥnūr* does not feel ashamed. You are the Sultan of the World. My words that I send you, these are true speech.

1r **Letter 4** | In the name of God the Living the Eternal,

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

I inform you about Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr Labuṣuwāriṣ*) (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. *būrṭa*)¹⁷ of Prester John (*Brist Ğuwān*). I told him: ‘Sail to Massawa, like ‘Umar Qastīl said to the Sultan in Massawa’.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

¹⁶ The meaning of this passage is obscure.

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.

¹⁸ The meaning of this passage is obscure.

ما اسير ولا ارسل شي ولا احدا يروح الي الحبشه قلت له
براس للسلطان ان كنت انت ما تروح ارسل معي اثنين عراب
واثنين قريبه واحد ناقوس واحد اركن واحد فراضى¹⁵ واحد
ناس من اهل بردعان وخلي حوايج للسلطان تتبقا عندك الي
5 حين ما اجيب لك الجواب من ملك الحبشه وكل اهل
مصوع واهل بر الحبشه يعرفونك والرهبان والقسوس وسلطان
البر بحر نكاش سلطان كبير من قرايب برست جوان قال ليش
ما افعل ولا (ر) سل شي انت روح في طريقك اين تريد تريد
من ربيع تريد من بربره تريد من عدن فقلت انا ما معى طريق
10 من بلاد المسلمين الا من مصوع عبره ما معى طريق حتا الي
عدن قال انزل من عدن وروح قلت ما انزل انا اموت في
خدمت مولانا للسلطان منويل سرنا الي الهرموز ارسل الي
البطرون ومعه عسكر وقال انزل في الهرموز قلت براس
السلطان انا ما انزل في الهرموز في بلاد المسلمون) في بلاد
15 المورو انا اموت كم سن تياكو والامثل سن جوان تريد الحرب
انا اتكاتل معكم واموت ولا اروح من بلاد المسلمين اروح
الي الهند واجلس في كشي (؟) الي حين ي[...]. ان للسلطان
انكان يريد [...] ان | للسلطان نصره الله فهو يرسل قبطمو
نصراني عاقل يوديني الي الحبشه الي برست جوان وانكان
20 للسلطان ما يريد يردني الي بردعان اسير وامشي من طريق
روما من اسكندريه اروح بلادي فحبب¹⁶ (؟) عليه بالقوه الي
الهند منعني في كشي البيت اسكن فيه منعني الجامكيه وقد
بعث البس الذي معي كله واصرفيه علي ما بقا معي شي وانا
اسال مولانا السلطان نصره الله ان كان تريد برست جوان
25 ارسل قبطمو نصراني عاقل يوديني بلادي وانكان مولانا ما
لك عرض في برست جوان ارسل لي الجواب ردني الي
بردعان اروح الي روما يوديني بلادي بحق سنمريا وبحق

iv

APPARATUS | 3¹⁵ For. فرضي 21¹⁶ في يد؟

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 Nagāš* (Ar. *Baḥr Nakāš*) is a great sultan, among the relatives of Prester John (Ar. *Brist Ğuwān*). 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*).²⁰ I (will) die like São Tiago (Ar. *San Tiyākū*) or like São João (Ar. *San Ğuwān*). 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. *Kušt*) until the Sultan [...] if he wants [...] | the Sultan, may God help him. He sends (to) the Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*) a clever Christian who guides me to Ethiopia to Prester John (Ar. *Brist Ğuwān*). If the Sultan does not want this, he sends me back to Portugal (Ar. *Bard'ān*). 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. *Kušt*) 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. *Brist Ğuwān*), send (to) the Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*) a clever Christian who guides me to my country. If our Sovereign does not have a proposal to Prester John (Ar. *Brist Ğuwān*), mail me a reply and send me back to Portugal (Ar. *Bard'ān*). 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 Hrištūs*) (*sic*), by the cross of Christ son of God, send me a reply. I am staying in India,

¹⁹ Close to the harbour of Zingibār in Yemen.

²⁰ Portuguese *mouros*. 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 حريسطوس وبحق صليب المسيح ابن الله ردني
 الجواب فاني جالس في الهند لا انا من اهل الموت والا انا
 من اهل الحياة وان جميع ما قال لكم وارسل لكم البشوارص
 وكتب لكم كله كذب وتعلمو يا مولانا ما عمل هذه كله الا
 5 من جناب الفنشو البكيركى ويريد يعمل كذب وضيع
 عسكرك وضيع مالك وضيع مراكبك وان يا مولانا وما يريد
 يفتح باب الحبشه وما اعرف هذه من للسلطان(ن) الذى هذه
 عدو الصليب وانت يا مولانا عقلت كل اللدنيا¹⁷ وانت
 سلطان نصف اللدنيا واخوك برست جوان سلطان نصف
 10 اللدنيا وانا اريد ا(ل)نصف هذه وافتح هذه الطريق وصاحب
 بينك وبين اخوك برست جوان والبشوارص ما يريد وان جميع
 ما ارسل لك كذب وهو يريد لي الموت والله بعالي ما يريد
 وعد لي السحر واسقاني السم وما قدر ويريد يقتلني مجهر
 بحفان من مولانا للسلطان اما من جناب صبيك الرنصو قرمو
 15 قد ارسله البشورص الي دهلك وانا لقيته في دهلك وانا في
 مركب ضون جوان في سن بطرس وهو في بر كشي ومعه
 قريه ويريد يودي جواسيس واحد عبد واحد مسلم قلت
 امشي الي مصوع والي حرققو بندر ملك الحبشه هذه سلطان
 دهلك سارق كال[...]. يسرق [...] ويقتلكم فقال [...] |
 20 الورنصو قومو صبيك وجابوني وقال انا ما اعمل لكلامك الا
 الادي قال لي قمطمور البشوارص قلت قدام كاتيب القريه
 وقدام معلم القريه¹⁸ براس السلطان منوييل لا تنزلو البر الي
 دهلك يقتلكم¹⁹ فما سمعو مني²⁰ واسل صبيك ديكو اومه
 واسال كاتيب العربية²¹ الادي جالي اليك هو يعلمك بالكل
 25 وتكلم الادي جابين اليك في المراكب كلهم ويحلفكم

APPARATUS | 8¹⁷ It is the spelling in this letter. 22¹⁸ We read it misspelt القريه. 23¹⁹ It is struck out because of a metathesis: يقتلكم | 20 We read vertically in the margin: وكلم صبيك وضوكو اومه. 24²¹ We do not exclude in the last two lines a confusion between two close homographs, عربيه and قريه. We maintain this in our translation.

between the dead and the living. Everything that Lopo Soares (Ar. *Labušuwärīš*) 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-Bakīrkī*). He wants to make lies, to waste your soldiers, your money, your ships. He does not want to open²² 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 Ğuwān*), 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 Ğuwān*). Lopo Soares (Ar. *Labušuwärīš*) 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. *sabiy*) Lourenço do Carmo (Ar. *Alwaranšū Qūmū*), Lopo Soares (Ar. *Labušuwärīš*) sent him to Dahlak. I met him in Dahlak, while I was on Dom João's (Ar. *Dūn Ğuwān*) ship, the São Pedro (Ar. *San Biṭrus*). He was in the land of Cochin (Ar. *Kuṣī*) 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. *Alwanšū Qūmū*), your fidalgo (Ar. *sabiy*), and they brought me. He objected: 'I will only do of your words what Captain-Major Lopo Soares (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr Labušuwärīš*) (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. *Manūyīl*), do not go ashore in Dahlak, he will kill you!' They did not listen to me. Ask your fidalgo (Ar. *sabiy*) Diego Jaume (Ar. *Dīakū 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. *Bard'ān*),

²² The Arabic is ambiguous: *yaftaḥ* means to open but also to conquer.

يكلموك بالحق والصحيح وانا يا مولانا ما احدا يكتب لي
سلطان بردعان كتب بالعربي وقال لهم المين (؟) كتب الي
ابناشدر كتاب شفته (؟) وما أحدا يكتب لي شي وصل لي
كتابين من مولانا السلطان ولكن مولانا في قلبي شي كثير ما
5 يوسعه الف كتاب وانا يا مولانا السلطان جالس في كشي ما
عندي جامكيه ولا عند زاد وبعث لبسي وجميع ما معي ما
عندي شي وابوس سل البرنسي ذلك²² ومن جناب السلطان
ضونا مريا حرص جزا عظيم الله تعالي يرحمها ويبرد قلبكم وان
جميع بردعان يعضوني من جهت البشوارص ويخافو منه
10 ومن اهله ومن البرم واما يا مولانا ما عمل هذه كله الا ضون
جوان الدى كنت في مركبه سان بطرس فانه عمل في شي ما
عملوه القبطانات الادي جيت معهم الي عندكم الي بردعان
هوه الدى عمل هذه كله وقلت له في دهلك براس السلطان
امشي حتا تفتح الباب ويكلم بحر نكاش والرهبان الي حين
15 يجيى قبطمور من جدة قفال انا ما اخدم السلطان انا اخدم
قبطمور وسايد (؟) وحلف ديكو اومه هذه يكلمك بالحق
وحلفه وقرره انه يعرف وكان معنا في المركب فاننا معنا من
قبطمور(ر) في جده وانا اخدتهم الي دهلك وانا ارويتهم
الطريق الي دهلك والا ضاع المركب لكم (؟) يا مولانا
20 السلطان انت (؟) تشتري يسرا²³ تعتقهم اعتقنى لوجه الله
تعالى صدقا عنكم في جواب سرعة بالدى يلهمك الله تعالي

APPARATUS | 7²² It reads ذلك. أسراء²³ 20

letters in Arabic. He (?) told them (?): ‘Who wrote to (the) Ambassador (Ar. *anbašadūr*) 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. *Ḍūnā 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. *Bard’ān*) hates me because of Lopo Soares (Ar. *Labušuwāriš*), 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. *Ḍūn Ğuwān*), whose ship, the São Pedro (Ar. *Sān Biṭrus*), I was on. He did things that the captains with whom I came to you in Portugal (Ar. *Bard’ān*) (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 *Bāhr Nagāš* (Ar. *Bāhr Nakāš*) and the monks until the Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*) arrives from Jeddah. He replied: ‘I do not serve the Sultan, I serve (my) Captain-Major (Ar. *Qabiṭamūr*) and lord (? Ar. *sāyid*)!’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. *Qabiṭamūr*) 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 سید ‘lord’.

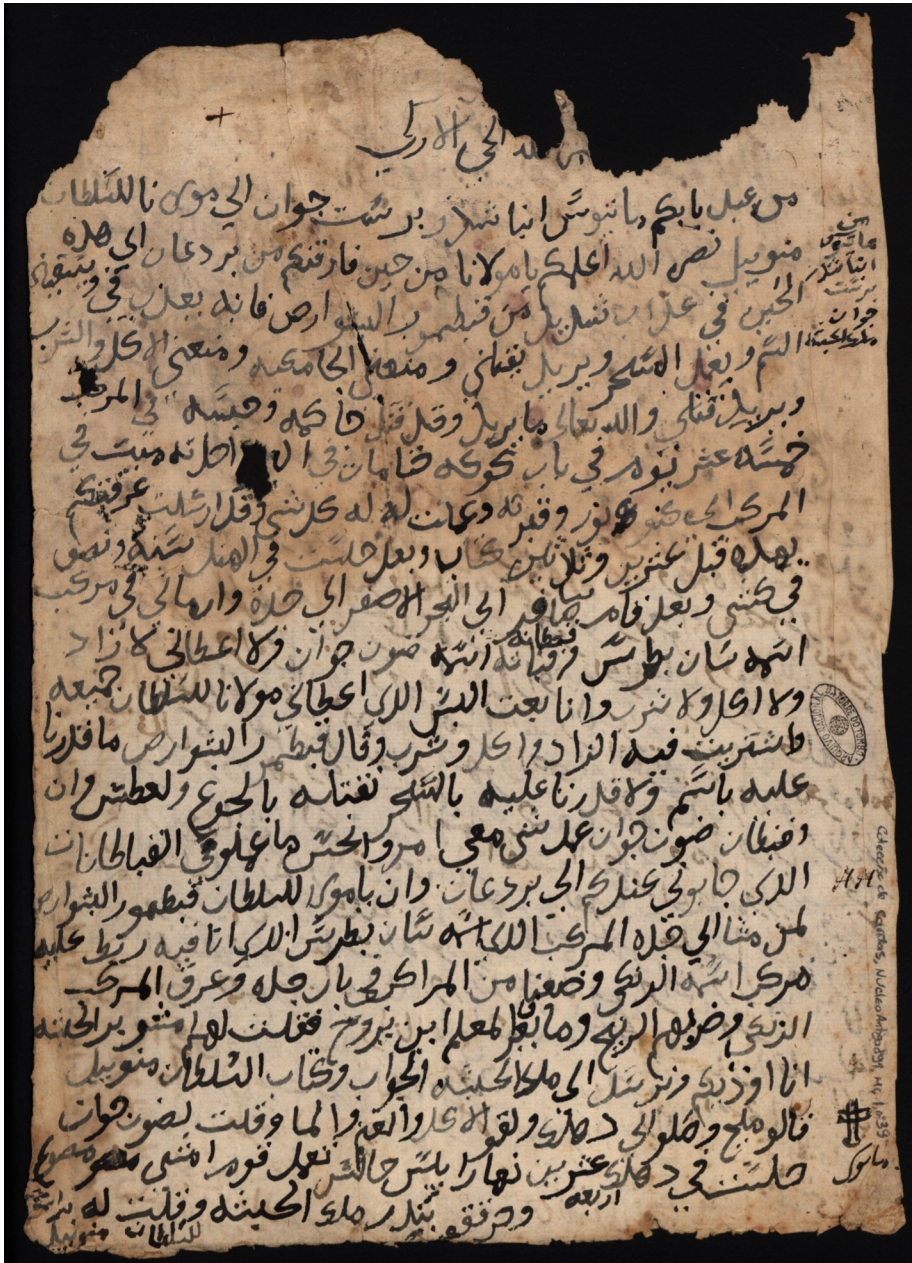


Fig. 3 Letter 1, 1r: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mc. 1, no. 39 ©Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo

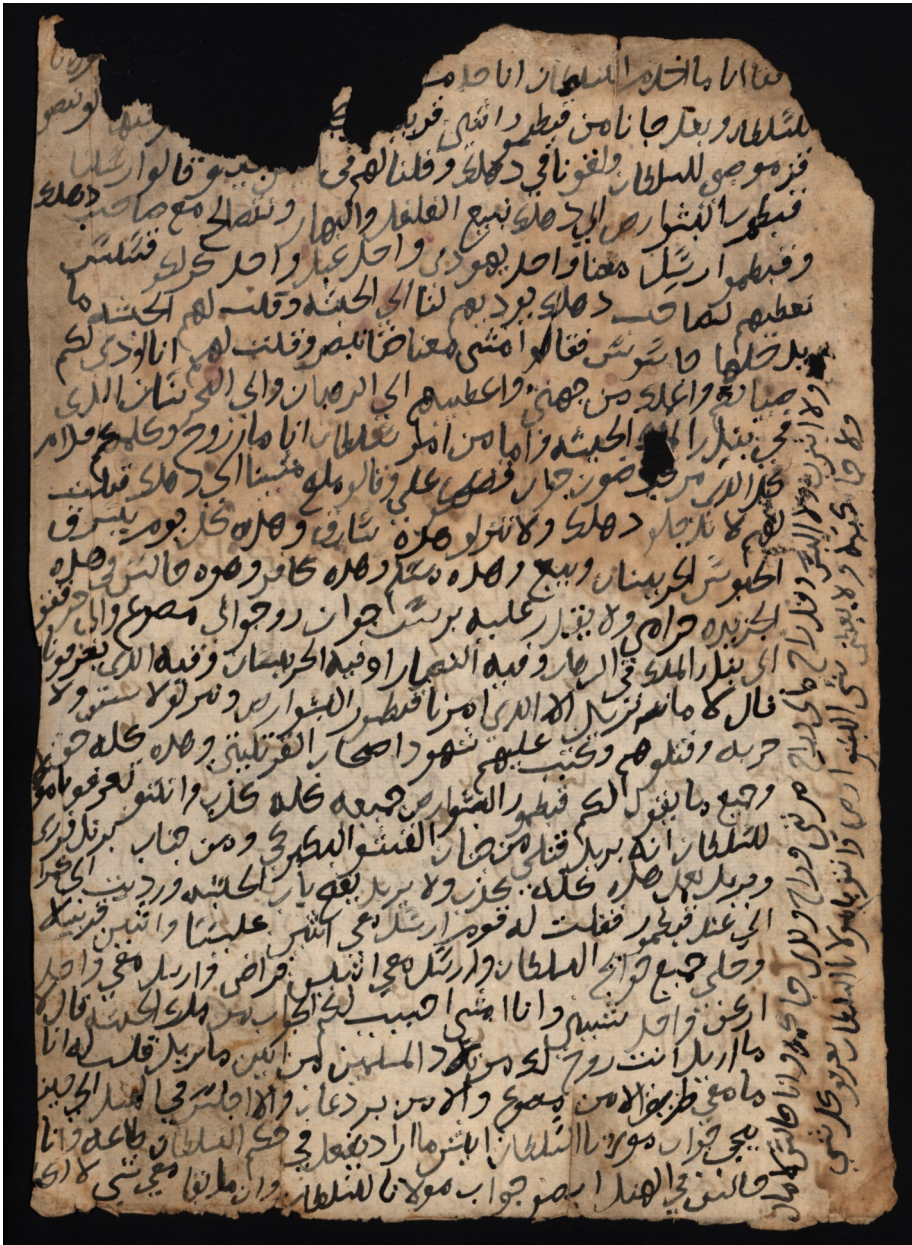


Fig. 4 Letter 1, 1v: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mc. 1, no. 39
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في
 بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
 من عبد يابغ هاتوش ابنا شذر برشت جوان الي هوي بالسلطان
 منويك نضر الله سلطان لنا صالح بين السلاطين اعلي باهورنا
 من جانب قنطور المشهور في حجاز فارقتم في عذار وبقيل
 قنطور المشهور ببقيلته في حجاز وبعني الحاه مجيده ولا اخذ ولا شذر
 ولا لئس دخل يوه الي الكلام القبله وقل احدي معه الي
 البحر الا هو دخل الي حجاز ورا مثل اليهودي واناني مركب
 سنان بطرس وقبطان المركب صون جوان وعراقي الحسن
 علوي برند قرزي دافنيش برزي ومنعوي الاكل والنزب
 وقالو حجابكوت ومن حجاب الوتصو قمره الذي قتلوه في دهله
 فقلب لهم لان قتلوه دهله افسر الي مصوع الي بلاد الحبشة
 الذي يعرفوننا ونوسك اي عيله ملك الحبشه قالوا
 ما نعمل الا الذي قال لنا قنطور وخلقته براس منويك
 وراس ملك الحبشه ونام الرز لان قتلوه دهله بلاد حجاز
 وراسه قلوب برقي ربي فرشتيان من اكنوش وبيع ما رصو
 وبعر خلت قنطور في حيران امشي اي مصوع ادالي بيدار
 ملك الحبشه امه فرقعو دخل النصارى والزهان يعرفوا ومنتو
 حواجكم ونطو اكنشه ونزد الجواب علي السلطان منويك قال
 لا يا رايك ولا اقلح باب اكنشه واكلته ما هم نصرانية وما
 روح انت اي بلاد المسلمين ابن هاتوش قلت انا ما هي
 طريق الامصوع ولا تردني القتل حجاب بردي جواب السلطان

Fig. 5 Letter 2, 1r: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mc. 1, no. 40 ©Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo

منو بيل ان كان يريد الجواب من ملك الحبشة يرسله مرابطا
رجل عاقل يرد بنا الى بدار ملك الحبشة وازحا السلطان منو بيل
ما يريد فهو يراد الجواب على انما يتبدل ويحول في روح ابن
ما تريد فلا اى الحزن الله تعالى يفتح لي طريقا مشي فيه وانا
يردى الي عنده امر فراض اخذم الرب وان يامورنا
السلطان ما هي شي لا اكله ولا يشربه ولا يعطى شي
على الزاد وعلى الاكله ولا يشربه ولا يعطى شي
وهنا هي شي اخر في نفسي هذا ان يامورنا
للسلطان ان شاء الله تعالى من يفتقر الي البس
من بلاد المتولين وتفتقه حلصني وارسل الي الجواب اما الي
اما لا صلحنا من ولاد البرنسي وانا جالس في الهند الي
حين يجي الجواب من بوجانا السلطان نصر الله تعالى وان
يامورنا لا ياهن كلام فيظهور ان جميع ما يقوله ظله
كل من وانتو تعرفون من جنات فيظهور الفتنو البكر
ومن جنات يريد فردي انه ما يريد لي خير وطفه
انسو يامورنا على برنسي مناجي وما اكل برنسي مناجي
مثل الریح والا مثل الخراو مثل الكلب يكم يامورنا
(تنو تعرفو كل شي والجنون ما عليه خرج العقال هذه
الزمان ما تنفع تنفع المي انهن اللان يتعطر وطلبه الماهن
تمه ويعيطر مثل العنم وما يغزو الترياع والديعالي
بصلح الامر ويطلب الي الخير انوس

Fig. 6 Letter 2, 1v: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 40
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0.

لسم الله اكي الاربي

من عمل بابك ما يوس انا شدر بشت جوان ابي مورنا السلطان منو بيل نصره الله تعالى
اعلم من حين نافتكم من بردجان في عذر ان شريد من قبطور الشوارص وهو
بريد قتلني والله ما يريد وقتل منعتي الهاميكه ولا اكل ولا شرب وقد بعث
جميع ما معي على الاكل والشرب ما بقا معي شئ وقد اخذني معه الى جده
ابي البحر الاحمر ولا مصروف ولا اكل ولا شرب وخطي في مركب سنان بطرس
وناخذته اشبهه ضون جوان ورجان معنا من بوطلة مركب اشبهه النوي وعلي
باب خلا صفنا من المراكب وعرق النوي وما عرفنا اين راح قبطور المراكب
فاتو من العتس العسكر والمعلم ما يعرف اين بروج ورا دو بومو بالمركب
علي البر انا باهوا نا اذ تفر الى داهلك واد بونهم الطريق ابي بر الحينه
وقلت ابي ضون جوان قبطان المركب برا سر السلطان منو بيل اشئ
ابي مصراع الى بندر ملكا اكنه نصف نهار قال ما اريد اظلم السلطان
انا اظلم قبطور الشوارص بعد اثناس اربعة وعشرين نهارا ثم دخلت
واضل عنهما ونفعا وقتلوا واحرقوا ليشر تعمل ضله وسلطان كاهل عوفي
ابي اجر البطرياركي وبعار اربعة وعشرين نهارا ما عرف قبطور ولا المراكب
ابن راحته وبعار انا قريتين مركبين من غدر قبطور في الواحل الصغرى
الو بنصو فره وصي السلطان وقلنا الهامي ايلتر جستو قفالوازل سلنا قبطور
الي داهلك ودهم واحل عبل واحل بهواكي واحل كركو هجو وقالوا
لي يا انا شدر تعالي اشئ معنا فقلت من جانا صليت حواي وبعار ابي
في امرك ضون جوان وقلت لهم اشعواي مصوع الى حرف قوق بندر ملكا الو
قيد نصارا وقيد سلطان وقيد افسوس وقيد الذي يعرفوننا قوالو هليج
وضون جوان خلوفي ابي قالس حنت داهلك ابي صبر ما يبي

Fig. 7 Letter 3, 1r: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 41
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المركبين وتودو حبر وتجبو حبر والبري بعزوف من انصار او اهل الجنة بعد كونه
من الصبح شاف المرحب الي حمران ونخا والونصر قروا خذونا الي ملك
وقلت لهم ليس تفعلوه هذه اول الحرب هذه ضون حمران وما وجد ملك
حراهي وشارقا واحر توبلاده ابش تعلم عنده هذه كل يومه يشرف الجوس
وبيع ما سمع مني دخلوا وطلعوا عليهم وقال لهم انا صاحب الدير نريد
اناء افعالكم وقالوا هذه ابنا مندر ما نأمنه انت تودي لنا هذه
الثلاثة رجال الي عنده ملك الجنة قال لهم من جبا اعطي من كس من عندي
واود بهم الي عند نجي كاش من نيو طين الجنة قالوا من جبا وطف
لهم وهم اخطوه فاش شى عليه اشرفي ذهب وقال لهم اريد اقالكم
فقالوا انزلوا الي الساطل بركة تخلو سيقون ولا حردنا ناتي كواندنا
معكم فقلت لهم لا تشين قيطان براس السلطان منو بيل براس
ملك الجنة من انشان الله لا تنزلوا الي هذه يقتلوكم وقالوا
انت ما تعرف شي هذه صاحبنا دخلنا معه وهو بودي لنا
ناشنا الي الجنة فرأوا وفضلوا وما سمعوا كلدهن وكنت عليه
ورقه بهن وقالوا نخا ما فعل الاممي قال لنا فظهور روه نينا وجبا الي
حمران الي عند فظهور وما تو ثلاثة منهم وقلت الي فظهور روه
انت والمراد في الناس نروح الي بارنا ملك الجنة قال انا ما اريد
انت روح كوجي قالوا انت ما نزل قلاير كل بر زعان فقلت انا ما
اروح فقا اخدم السلطان منو بيل لار دله اكم ان من ملك الجنة
وكل هذه بريد فعل كل بريد ولا يفتح بان الجنة من نشان
الفتشو الطبري فظهور الاول ومن نشان برند قررك ومن نشان
افرنش بررك النواخ الدير طابوك الي عند كاي بر ديار و بريد
بعلا هذه كلر ويا مورنا السلطان انت صنف و تعرف كل شي
ولا سمع كلام فظهور السوارض فانه بريد قتلى واليه بريد

دانا تم ما بركو كل كار والحي ما عليه روح دانت سلطان
دانا كارى الدير بيلدو فله قوه
الاسيا

Fig. 8 Letter 3, 1v: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 41
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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

من عبد بلعام ما يترقى ابنا سردر كجوان اليه مؤمن بالسلطان ضوميل نصره الله تعالى
اعلمكم يا بوردان من جانب قطور الشوارض شافونا دعاهي البصر الا حمر الي جلده
والي عكز و صجران لا اعطاني زاد ولا جابجه وصلنا الي باب الحنينة الي
بينت جوان وقلت له شيراي مصوع مثل ما قال للسلطان عمر فنتلج في
مصوع قال ليس وبعد راح الي حله صبيح ماله وضع عثكرو در الي حمر
قلت له في حمران قومه ممثني الي مصوع مثل ما قال للسلطان قال ليس
ما اشير ولا ارتقل نشي ولا احلا بروج الي الحنينة قلت له براسي للسلطان
ان كنت انت ما تروح اركل معي اثنين عراب واثنين قرية واحل
نافوس واحل ارجن واحد فراصي واحل ناس من اهل مردغان واهل جويج
السلطان تنقا علكي اي عين ما احب لو احواب من ملك الحنينة وطل اهل مصوع
واهل بر الحنينة يعزوني والرهان والقشوش و سلطان البر كز نياش
سلطان كخير من قرايب كزمت جوان قال ليس ما اقول ولا اسل شي
انت روح في طرفك ابن ترمز نزيل من ربيع نزيل من بربره نزيل من
علك قلت انا ما هو طرفي من بلاد المسلمين الا من مصوع عبده ما هو طرفي
جوان علك قال انزل من علك روح قلت ما انزل انا الوص في صلوت
موزن بالسلطان ضوميل شرا الي الهور ارسل الي البطرون ومعهم عثكرو قال
انزل في الهور قلت براسي السلطان انا ما انزل في الهور في بلاد الملك
في بلاد الهور وانا اكون كم تسن نياح ولا مثل مش جوان نزيل الحرب انا
ان كان ملك واهل من ولا اروح من بلاد المسلمين انا اروح الي الهل واحل
في كشي اي كخير به ان السلطان ان كان بر

Fig. 9 Letter 4, 1r: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 42 ©Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo

Colecção de Cartas, Núcleo Antigo, 891, mç. 1, nº 42

السلفان نصر الله وهو يرسل قبظير نصراني عاقول بوديني ابي الحبيشه الى
جوان وان كان للسلفان ما يريد بوديني الى بردجان اشهدوا مني من طرفي
روما من اشكره اروح بلا دري فحيد عليه بالقوه ابي الهنل منعتني في
كشي البيت اشكر فيه منعتني الحاميه دخلت بعد اللش الذي هو
كله واضرفه على امانه في شتي وانا انسا من دورا بالسلفان نصر
ان كان نزيل في جوان ارسل قبظير نصراني عاقول بوديني بلا دري
وان كان باهو انا ما لا عمر في شتي ان ارسل في الحوار بوديني الى بردجان
اروح ابي روما بوديني بلا دري نحو شتمها في حق الحق من بلطوش
وحق صليب المسيح ابن الله الذي الحوار نالي حاله في الهنل انا من
اهل المون والا انا من اهل الجاه وان جميع ما فان لكم وارسل الى البشوار
وكتلك كله كلر ونعلو باهو انا ما اعلم هذه كله الا من جمان القنوس
الخير في دبريد بعلم كلر وضع عشر كركي وضع ما هو وضع مر كركي
وان باهو انا وما يريد نعل ما باب الحبه وما اعرف هذه من للسلفان
الذي هذه علو الصليب واشهد باهو انا عقلت عمل الدنيا وانت
سلفان نصر الله الدنيا واجود جرسن جوان سلطان نصر الله الدنيا وانا ارسل
انصف هذه وانك هذه الطريق وما صاب ليك وبين اجود نرسن جوان
والبشوار ما يريد وان جميع ما ارسل الى كلر وهو يريد لي المون
والله يعالني ما يريد وعلم لي السحر واشتقاني السهم وما قلر في نزيل
يقتلني هجو سخا من مؤذنا للسلفان وانا بين جنا صبيك الوشعو
قوه وقلر سلمه البشوار اي هذه وانا القبه في دريلط وانا في مر كركي
ضون جوان في بس بطرس وهو في بر كشي وهو في نزيل ونزيل
بوديني قوا شمس واحد فكتس واحد جيل واحد سلم نلت امشي الى
منصوب والحق قوه نيل ملك الحبه هذه سلطان هذه في شارق كان
بشوار

Fig. 10 Letter 4, 1v: ANTT, Colecção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mç. 1, no. 42
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الورى نصير فر من صيد وجابوني وقانا ناما العبد سركه والا الله قال لي
 فظهور الشوارص قلت قدام كاتب القريه وقدام معلم القريه
 براس السلطان منوسيل لا نزلو البعالي دهلك بقلنكم فاشهوه مني
 ولا سركه صيد ديكواومه واشك خاتيب القريه الذي جاءني الله
 بالحق في الصلاه وانا يا هوهر ما انا احد ايتني سلكان بردعا ركب
 بالحق في وقال اللهم امين كتب لي انا خذ ركبنا صفتته وما انا احد ايتني
 لي شي وصل لي ايتني من هوزنا السلطان وبعنا يا هوهرنا في قلبي شي كثير
 فانا بوشعه الف كتابنا يا هوهرنا السلطان جالس في عشي ما عند لي
 حاكميه ولا عند زاده وعن لبي وجميع ما هي ما عند لي شي
 وا بوس سلك البري لبي ذلك ومن جناب السلطان صونا هو ما عند لي شي
 عظم الله تعالى برها وبرد قلبك وان جمع بردعا بيفضولي من
 جهنت الشوارص وكافونهه ومن اهلكه ومن اليوم واما يا هوهر
 ما عند لي شي الا صون جوار الذي كنت في مركبه شان برطس
 نانه على لي شي ما علمه القبطان الذي صبت هوقم الي عندك الي
 بردعا صور الدر على حله وقلسه في دهلك بلس السلطان
 امشي خاتبة البان ويكلم به لكاش واليه بان الي جيت لي قبطور من
 جده قفانا ما اخدم السلطان انا اخدم قبطور ونسابل وطلق
 ديكواومه صوره نكله بالحق وطفه وقرره انه يعرفه وان
 معناني المركب فانتا معنا من قبطور في جلدانا احدكم الي دهلك
 وانا ازو بتهم الطوف الي دهلك والا كان ضاع المركب هو نامورا
 السلطان انت انت شكري بيشرا وتعلم اعترفي لوجه الله تعالى
 صلواتكم في جواب سرغته بالذي بلبه الله تعالى

Fig. 11 Letter 4, 2r: ANTT, Coleção de cartas, Núcleo Antigo 891, mc. 1, no. 42 ©Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo

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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 Gə‘əz 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 Gə‘əz 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 anbašādūr Brist Ğuwān 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.