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Presbiteri Iohannis, Sive, Abissinorum Imperii Descriptio

Stock#: 81936
Map Maker: Ortelius
Date: 1581 circa
Place: Antwerp
Color: Hand Colored
Condition: VG+
Size: 17.5 x 15 inches
Price: SOLD



Description:

Ortelius' Map of Central Africa, Chronicling the Christian Kingdom of Prester John

Fine example of Ortelius' famous map of the Kingdom of Prester John, from his *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, the first modern atlas of the world.

The map shows much of the African continent, along with the Arabian Peninsula and parts of southwest Asia. The emphasis is on the length of the Nile River, which is the part of the map with the most detail. In other parts of Africa, with less detail, elephants roam the plains. Rough seas surround the continent, with several sea monsters. In the lower left corner is a large sailing vessel, an Egyptian dhow, firing a canon.

Several large blocks of text are sprinkled across the map. The most decorative is in the lower right corner, where a strapwork cartouche complete with busts and floral details surround the title. The title translates to, "A representation of [the country of] Prester John, or the Empire of the Abyssinians."

In the upper left corner, a strapwork cartouche is topped by a coat of arms. As the text below it explains, these symbols belong to Prester John. The text reads:

Honorary title of Prester John/King David is the highest of my Kings. [I, Presbyterius Ioannes], specially chosen by God, pillar of faith, born from the tribe of Judah, son of David, son of Salomo, son of the pillar of Zion, son from the seed of Jacob, son of the hand of Maria, son of Nahum's flesh, son of the holy Peter and Paul in mercy, emperor of upper and great Æthiopia, and of the legal grounds



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and countries of the most elevated kingdoms; king of Goa, Caffates, Fatigar, Angota, Baru, Balinguanza, Adea, Vangua, Goiama where the Nile has its sources, of Amara, Banguamedrum, Ambea, Vangucum, Tigremahon, of Saba, homeland of the Queen of Saba, of Barnagassum and Lord of all of Namibia, extending all the way to Egypt.

Other notes around the map refer to natural resources, customs, river flows, and religion. For example, a large note on Nubia reads:

Nubia was once a Christian kingdom, but now they do not apply themselves to religion at all. The region is very rich in gold and ivory, and yields sugar and fruits in great abundance. Its main city is Dangala, whose inhabitants are very wealthy and they trade with Egyptian merchants. Here they make many shoes and bags. Their houses are covered with chalk and straw.

Other notes refer to mythical inhabitants. Lake Zaire is supposedly full of “sea gods and sirens.” In Cafates, near Lake Zaire, “they say the Amazones live.”

Prester John

The most important myth referred to in this map is listed in the title, that of Prester John. The legend of a Christian Kingdom lost among Muslim lands was popular from the twelfth century and continued long into the seventeenth. Prester John was supposedly descended from one of the three magi. Over time, the utopian kingdom of Prester John came to house a bevy of other fantastical objects, including the Fountain of Youth.

The idea for Prester John seems to have stemmed from a mysterious letter sent to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I. The letter, supposedly written by John, describes his power, faith, and lands. The letter circulated ca. 1165 and survives in nearly 100 medieval manuscript copies. Initially, Europeans thought Prester John’s kingdom was in India, and later in Central Asia. Finally, in the early modern period, the search shifted to Africa, when Portuguese navigators came upon Christian Ethiopia.

Ortelius’ map shows the ubiquity and strength of the Prester John story in sixteenth-century Europe. The story was a one of the durability of the Christian faith during a time when Christian Europe was often in conflict with Muslims in Barbary and throughout the Ottoman Empire.

Mountains of the Moon and the source of the Nile

Interestingly, the source of the Nile—a huge subject of debate amongst sixteenth-century mapmakers—is different on this map than on Ortelius’ general map of Africa, which was also included in the atlas.



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Typically, mapmakers thought the Nile River rose from twin lakes south of the equator, which were near the Mountains of the Moon. Streams from the mountains fed the lakes. Ptolemy describes such a lakes-and-mountains layout in his works, although the precise identification of the Mountains of the Moon may have been a fourth century addition to his text.

Sixteenth century mapmakers, including Waldseemuller, chose to follow the Ptolemaic model. This was typical of cartographers at the time, who had abandoned Ptolemy's coastlines in favor of the more recent Portuguese outlines yet who also clung to Ptolemaic place names for the interior of Africa well into the nineteenth century.

Giacomo Gastaldi, most likely thanks to sources he read via the travel writer Ramusio, chose to abandon the Mountains of the Moon entirely in his 1564 map of Africa. Instead, he drew a massive central lake from which flows the Nile, Zaire (Congo), Cuama (Zambezi), and Spirito Sancto (Limpopo) Rivers. To the east is another, smaller lake at roughly the same latitude, which also feeds part of the Nile. Therefore, Gastaldi created an entirely different view of the interior of Central Africa, while still embracing Ptolemy's twin lakes theory.

In Ortelius' Africa map ([here](#)), included in the original 1570 *Theatrum*, he also included a large central lake, called Cafates. He rejected the name of Zaire-Zembere used by Gastaldi. To the east and just slightly north was another, smaller lake. Rivers from the north of both lakes wend northward and join to form the Nile. The Zaire (Congo) flows from the northeast of Lake Cafates, while the Zuama (Zambezi) exits at the south of the lake. It branches into the Spiritu Sant, or the Limpopo. Thus, one lake gives rise to four of the largest rivers in Africa.

In this map, however, Ortelius has brought back the Mountains of the Moon. The Nile still branches from two lakes, but the larger of these is now called Zaire, as it had been with Gastaldi. Clearly Ortelius continued to review sources between drafting the Africa map and this one.

Theatrum Orbis Terrarum and the states of the "Presbiteri Iohannis sive Abissinorum Imperii Descriptio"

In 1570, Ortelius published the first modern atlas, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, or "Theater of the World;" that is, he produced a set of uniform maps with supporting text gathered in book form. Previously, there were other bound map collections, specifically, the Italian Lafreri atlases, but these were sets of maps—not necessarily uniform—selected and bound together on demand.

Ortelius' atlas outperformed competing atlases from other cartographic luminaries like the Mercator family. Between 1570 and 1612, 31 editions of the atlas were published in seven languages. At the time of



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its publication, it was the most expensive book ever produced.

Detailed Condition: