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## Ortelius Map of Africa

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# Ortelius Map of Africa

## Abstract

The “*Presbiteri Iohannis Sive, Abissinorum Imperii Descriptio*,” or “Map of the Kingdom of Prester John,” is a work by Abraham Ortelius, a cartographer, cosmographer, and publisher who was born and died in Antwerp, Belgium. This map was published in the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, or *Theater of the World*, “the first uniformly sized and systematically collected set of maps by different mapmakers which is acknowledged as the first atlas,” published c. 1570 and edited into a number of languages posthumously through 1612. The atlas contained 70 maps engraved by Frans Hogenberg on 53 folio sheets. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

Presbiteri Iohannis Sive Abissinorum Imperii Descriptio, Prester John, Abraham Ortelius, Nestorianism, Africa

## Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

## Comments

Produced as part of a collaboration between Kay Etheridge's course FYS-188: Exploration of the Marvelous: Art and Science in the Renaissance, and Felicia Else's course ARTH 284: Wonders of Nature and Artifice: The Renaissance Quest for Knowledge.

Original version online at <http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/ortelius-map-of-africa/>

# Ortelius Map of Africa

By Meredith Denise Staats

## Presbiteri Iohannis Sive, Abissinorum Imperii Descriptio



Abraham Ortelius, Presbiteri Iohannis Sive, Abissinorum Imperii Descriptio, Antwerp, Belgium, c. 1570, Engraving, 37.5 x 43.5 cm, Gift of the History Department through the generosity of The Kenneth H. Newbould, Class of 1958, Endowed Fund in History, Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College

The “*Presbiteri Iohannis Sive, Abissinorum Imperii Descriptio*,” or “Map of the Kingdom of Prester John,” is a work by Abraham Ortelius, a cartographer, cosmographer, and publisher who was born and died in Antwerp, Belgium. This map was published in the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, or *Theater of the World*, “the first uniformly sized and systematically collected set of maps by different mapmakers which is acknowledged as the first atlas,” published c. 1570 and edited into a number of languages posthumously through 1612. The atlas contained 70 maps engraved by Frans Hogenberg on 53 folio sheets.<sup>1</sup>

The character of Prester John dates back at least to the twelfth century, four hundred years before Ortelius’ map. John first appeared as a Christian priest in India and Central Asia, a “Nestorian

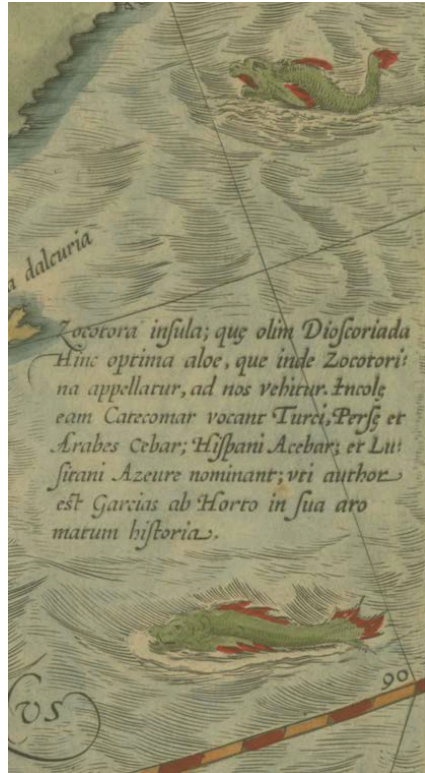
Christian, a member of a sect today called the Church of the East or the Assyrian Church.”<sup>2</sup> Over time, mapmakers moved Prester John’s location to Africa to signify the shift in religious tensions. While Prester John was originally set in the Middle East, as the west discovered more about Asia and moved their colonization efforts south, Prester John moved south, too. While John is not depicted in this map, the “imaginary kingdom” of Prester John became synonymous with Africa into the sixteenth century in Western Christian thought and Western cartography.



Scan courtesy of Special Collections, Gettysburg College

Ortelius’ map is largely to scale, maps rivers, and pinpoints cities. While the map highlights different regions of the continent, South America is simply covered in mountains. In areas that are less populated and largely uncharted, Ortelius fills those spaces with larger-than-life elephants. In the ocean on either side of the continent are whales that appear to be dragons and a war ship headed for the South African coast.





Scan courtesy of Special Collections, Gettysburg College

For full effect, here is an image of the Prester John map in Gettysburg College's own cabinet of curiosities.



Photo courtesy of Felicia Else

1. R.V. Tooley, *Tooley's Dictionary of Mapmakers: Revised Edition K-P*, ed. Valerie Scott (Tring, England: Early World Press, 2003), 358.

2. Dennis Reinhartz, *The Art of the Map: An Illustrated History of Map Elements and Embellishments*, (New York: Sterling, 2012), 108.