Early in the year 1145 a certain clergyman of Syria set out on a journey to western Europe, seeking aid for the beleaguered Christian states that the Crusaders had established in the Near East. He was Hugh, Bishop of Jabala—a small coastal town which in ancient times had been the great Phoenician port of Byblos, and which today is the Lebanese village of Jubayl. Though his see was in the Orient, the bishop himself was a Westerner, born in France; in the terminology of the times he was deemed a Latin, one who accepted the supremacy of the Pope and worshiped according to the Roman Catholic rite. During his career among the Crusaders, Bishop Hugh had distinguished himself as a capable and tough-minded diplomat, involved in matters both secular and churchly. As one of the chief spokesmen for Latin interests, he had fought the attempts of the Emperor of Byzantium to gain power over the various Crusader principalities: the Greek-speaking Byzantines, although fellow Christians, were sometimes looked upon by the Latin Crusaders as more dangerous than the Saracens themselves. And Bishop Hugh had also protected the interests of the Pope.
against the encroachments of the Byzantine Greek Orthodox Church in the Near East. The Byzantine and Roman churches had been bitter rivals for many years, and to a good Latin like Bishop Hugh, a Byzantine Christian was, if not actually a heretic, then certainly a schismatic, not to be trusted in doctrinal questions.

The bishop's mission came at a tense time for the Crusaders. Not since their conquest of the Holy Land, nearly fifty years before, had they been in such peril. In 1095 the Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus had asked Pope Urban II for a few hundred experienced knights, to assist him in a project he was organizing for the reconquest of Byzantium's lost eastern provinces. In the seventh century the Arabs had taken Egypt, Syria, and the rest of the Near East from the Byzantines; later, Turkish warriors out of Central Asia had seized much of the Arab-held territory; by the late eleventh century, though, the Turks were quarreling bitterly among themselves, and Emperor Alexius saw a good chance to drive the Moslems out of his nation's former lands. Since one of the places Alexius hoped to recapture was Jerusalem, Christianity's holiest shrine, Pope Urban lent enthusiastic support to the scheme, urging all of Western Christendom to take part in the campaign. The results were dismaying for Byzantium. An uncouth army of thousands of European soldiers marched east in 1096 and 1097, overrunning Byzantine territory and sweeping devastatingly onward through Asia Minor into Syria. The Saracens (as the Crusaders termed all Moslems, of whatever nation) were defeated at every turn, and the leaders of the invading army began to establish themselves as princes in the conquered land, with only the most tenuous allegiance to Byzantium. Thus there came to be a Count of Edessa, a Prince of Antioch, a Count of Tripoli, and a King of Jerusalem—all of them rough Latin warriors who set up little feudal states of the European sort in the Near East.

These states survived, and even flourished, despite Saracen harassment and fierce dynastic squabbles among the leading Crusaders. New settlers came to the Holy Land, and in a couple of generations a curious hybrid society had taken form. As the chronicler Fulcher of Chartres wrote, "We who were westerners find ourselves transformed into Orientals. The man who had been an Italian or a Frenchman, transplanted here, has become a Galilean or a Palestinian. A man from Rheims or Chartres has turned into a citizen of Tyre or Antioch. We have already forgotten our native lands. To most of us they have be-
come territories unknown, or places never heard mentioned any more.” The Latins of the Crusader states still observed the Roman Catholic rituals and still maintained the structure of the European feudal system, but otherwise they had come to imitate the ways of the Saracens; they fancied silken draperies, richly ornamented carpets, tables handsomely carved and inlaid with precious metals, dinnerware of gold and silver, vessels of porcelain imported from China. The knights, when they were not in armor, dressed in silk robes, Saracen style, and shielded their heads from the sun with turbans.

But life was precarious in this odd enclave of western European Christendom. The Crusader states, all together, were no more than a narrow strip at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. To the east and to the south lay hostile Moslem principalities, waiting for an opportunity to drive the Crusaders into the sea. The Crusaders’ neighbors immediately to the west were the crafty Byzantines, who had little love for the Latin barons. Byzantium, sprawling from the Black Sea to the borders of Italy, was an immense barrier between the Latins of the Near East and their kinsmen and coreligionists of the Western countries.

Under the leadership of the Turkish General Imad ad-din Zengi, the Saracens began seriously to threaten the Crusader states in the 1130s. Taking advantage of feuding among the Crusader princes, Zengi made himself master of a great deal of territory in northern Syria, and, late in 1144, laid siege to Edessa, the capital of the northernmost Crusader state. This ancient city in eastern Asia Minor (now the Turkish town of Urfa) was strategically located on the Syrian frontier, dominating a buffer zone that separated Crusader-held Syria from the Moslem world to the east; its population was largely Christian, though not Christians of the Latin rite, and it had been ruled since 1098 by the family of the Crusader General Baldwin of Lorraine. On Christmas Eve, 1144, the Turks broke through Edessa’s walls; the citizens were thrown into confusion as sword-wielding Saracens burst into their city, and thousands were slain or trampled to death. Zengi ordered the execution of all Latins caught in the city, though he spared the native Christian inhabitants.

The fall of Edessa sent shock waves through the entire Crusader world. Never before had the Saracens succeeded in ousting the Crusaders from a major city. The tide of battle had always gone the other way, from the time of the first invasion by the Latins in 1097. Now, with Zengi rampaging in the north, a real prospect existed that the
whole conquest might be undone. Already Saracen troops were testing the defenses of the great Syrian city of Antioch. There had been a shift of momentum, and Zengi suddenly seemed invincible. The Crusaders, in panic, dispatched emissaries to the rulers of western Europe in quest of Christian reinforcements. Nothing less than a second Crusade, it seemed, would save the endangered Latin states of the Holy Land.

Among those emissaries was Bishop Hugh of Jabala, whom Prince Raymond of Antioch sent to enlist the support of Pope Eugenius III. In the autumn of 1145 Bishop Hugh reached Italy and learned that a popular revolutionary uprising directed against the secular authority of the Pope had forced Eugenius, who had been in office less than nine months, to flee from Rome. The meeting between the bishop and the pontiff therefore took place in the central Italian town of Viterbo, on November 18, 1145. We know a good deal about what was said at this conference, because, fortunately, one of the most trustworthy and learned historians of medieval times happened to be in Viterbo that autumn, and he made a careful record of Bishop Hugh’s words. He was the German churchman Otto, Bishop of Freising, who, by virtue of his chance encounter with the Bishop of Jabala at Viterbo, became the vehicle by which the remarkable tale of Prester John first was made known in Europe.

Otto belonged to the Hohenstaufen family, which for centuries would dominate Germany and the Holy Roman Empire. He had had a lengthy and intensive education before taking up his ecclesiastic responsibilities, and his famous book, *Historia de Duabus Civitatibus* (*The History of the Two Cities*), an account of the world from the Creation to the year 1146, is an extraordinarily rich and detailed chronicle, the product of a supple and well-stocked mind. (The Two Cities of Otto’s title were Jerusalem and Babylon, which he regarded symbolically as the city of God and the city of the Devil; he interpreted all the events of history as stages in the conflict between the heavenly powers and those of the Inferno, and believed that the twelfth-century world was on the verge of an apocalyptic era in which Antichrist would appear on earth.)

The account of Bishop Hugh’s visit to Viterbo is found in the seventh book of Otto’s chronicle. There we are told that Hugh spoke eloquently of the plight of the Latins of the Holy Land since the fall of Edessa, and asked the Pope’s help in making Western rulers aware of
the dangers now facing the Christian realms of the Near East. According to Otto, the Syrian bishop then went on to relate this story:

"Not many years ago a certain John, a king and priest who lives in the extreme Orient, beyond Persia and Armenia, and who, like all his people, is a Christian although a Nestorian, made war on the brothers known as the Samiardi, who are the kings of the Persians and Medes, and stormed Ecbatana, the capital of their kingdom. . . . When the aforesaid kings met him with Persian, Median, and Assyrian troops, the ensuing battle lasted for three days, since both sides were willing to die rather than flee. At last Presbyter John—for so they customarily call him—put the Persians to flight, emerging victorious after the most bloodthirsty slaughter.

"He [Bishop Hugh] said that after this victory the aforesaid John had moved his army to the aid of the Church in Jerusalem, but when he had come to the river Tigris he had not been able to take his troops across it in any vessel. Then he had turned to the north, where, he had heard, the river sometimes froze over in the winter cold. He had tarried there for some years, waiting for the frost, but on account of the continued mild weather there was very little, and finally, after losing much of his army because of the unaccustomed climate, he had been forced to return home.

"He is said to be a direct descendant of the Magi, who are mentioned in the Gospel, and to rule over the same peoples they governed, enjoying such glory and prosperity that he uses no scepter but one of emerald. Inspired by the example of his forefathers who came to adore Christ in his cradle, he had planned to go to Jerusalem, but was prevented, so it is said, by the reason mentioned above. But that is enough of this."

Thus the Western world had its first news of that extraordinary and mysterious Christian potentate of the Orient, Presbyter Ioannes—in the Latin of Otto of Freising—or Prester John, to give him the form of his name by which he was best known in medieval times. Who was this "Priest John," this monarch and ecclesiastic, this great warrior, this possessor of enormous wealth, this descendant of the Magi, this
follower of the Nestorian heresy? Where was his kingdom? How long had his nation existed? For the next five hundred years men would seek the answers to these questions. The quest for the realm of Prester John would become one of the great romantic enterprises of the middle ages, a geographical adventure akin to the search for El Dorado, for King Solomon's mines, for the Fountain of Youth, for the Holy Grail, for the Seven Cities of Cibola, for the land of the Amazons, for the lost continent of Atlantis. Men would look through the whole length of Asia for his glittering kingdom, and, not finding anything that corresponded to the legends of magnificence they had so often heard, they would hunt the land of Prester John in Africa as well; eventually they would persuade themselves they had discovered it.

Tracing the origins of the legend of Prester John leads the scholar on a quest nearly as exhausting and difficult as those undertaken by the medieval explorers. For, although there is little doubt that the chronicle of Otto of Freising provides the first written account of the famous king, the story of Prester John was surely not invented by Bishop Hugh of Jabala, and must have been in oral circulation long before Otto heard it from Hugh in Viterbo in 1145. But to uncover the sources of the tale Hugh told requires a lengthy voyage on a treacherous sea of conjecture.

It appears that Bishop Hugh's main purpose in speaking of Prester John to the Pope may have been to dispel rumors of Prester John's omnipotence that had already begun to spread through Europe. It would do the imperiled Crusaders no good to have the French, Italian, and German kings believe that an invincible Christian sovereign reigned in glory east of the Holy Land. So long as Europe thought that the devout (if heretical) Prester John, descendant of the Magi, was available to protect Jerusalem against the Saracens, there would be no need to send European armies in defense of the Crusader states.

Bishop Hugh's narrative, therefore, seems designed to puncture Europe's existing faith in the power of Prester John. He had tried to go to Jerusalem, Bishop Hugh declares, after defeating the Persians and the Medes; but he had been unable to get across the Tigris, and ultimately had had to return to his own kingdom without achieving his goal of visiting the Holy Land. Therefore it was dangerous for Europe to place credence in the hope that Prester John would aid the Crusaders; help must come from the West, or Jerusalem would surely fall to the infidels.
If Hugh’s aim was thus to discourage excessive dependence on the might of Prester John, he was successful. On December 1, 1145, Pope Eugenius issued a bull urging all princes of Western Christendom to join in a new Crusade. Two kings, Louis VII of France and Conrad III of Germany, agreed, after conferring with Bishop Hugh, to organize armies and lead them in person. A celebrated monk, Bernard of Clairvaux, known to us as St. Bernard, became the spiritual voice of the Crusade, recruiting hundreds of knights and thousands of common people by the fervor and piety of his sermons. In the spring of 1147 an immense force set out for the East. Otto of Freising himself was among the Crusaders, accompanying King Conrad, his half brother, to the Holy Land.

This mighty endeavor, however, ended disastrously. Most of the German troops were wiped out in their first battle with the Turks. The French army was thinned by starvation before it got east of Constantinople. The survivors of both forces then consumed their remaining resources in a badly conceived attack on the Saracen stronghold of Damascus, which produced a dispute among the Crusaders over strategy and a quick, ignominious retreat, during the course of which the Moslems inflicted heavy losses. King Conrad left the Holy Land in disgust in September 1148, and King Louis went back to France the following summer. The Second Crusade had been nothing but a vast waste of energy and money, costing the lives of thousands of men and gaining not an inch of territory for Christianity. The frictions developing out of it left the Crusader inhabitants of the Near East in a more precarious position than ever. They might just as well have relied on the mercies of Prester John, for all the good the intervention of the European princes did them.

Since the early nineteenth century, historians have recognized in Bishop Hugh’s story of Prester John’s victory over the Persians the distorted outlines of an authentic historical event: the defeat of Sanjar, the Seljuk Turk ruler of Persia, by the forces of the empire of Kara-Khitai, in 1141.

The Seljuks were the strongest of the Turkish tribes who swept into western Asia in the eleventh century. By the middle of that cen-
tury they had made themselves masters of most of Persia; then they moved into Iraq, and in 1055 forced the Caliph of Baghdad, nominal head of the Moslem world, to accept their “protection,” becoming a Seljuk puppet. Next they invaded Asia Minor, which was part of Byzantium; in 1071 they smashed a Byzantine army and captured Emperor Romanus IV Diogenes, thereby stripping Byzantium of her easternmost provinces. Syria and Palestine followed; by 1076 the Seljuks were in possession of Jerusalem. Their drive toward universal empire was halted, though, at the borders of Egypt in the south and at the outskirts of Byzantine Constantinople in the west. At the end of the eleventh century the warriors of the First Crusade succeeded in pushing the Seljuk out of the Holy Land and some of the surrounding territory, and the partition of the remaining empire among members of the Seljuk royal family further weakened its power; but the Persian Seljuk realm, under the strong leadership of Sanjar, flourished throughout the early decades of the twelfth century and greatly expanded its area at the expense of its neighbors.

Eventually the Persian Seljuks, as they extended their power eastward, came into conflict with the warriors of an equally dynamic and expansionist realm, that of Kara-Khitai. This was an empire founded by the Khitan, a tribe that once had governed much of China. Originally a nomadic pastoral people of Manchuria, the Khitan had organized a strong military confederation in A.D. 907, and their well-trained troops broke through the Great Wall a few years later. By 960 they ruled all of northern China. Styling themselves the Liao Dynasty, the Khitan emperors adopted Chinese dress and writing, took Chinese wives, and were converted to the main Chinese religions, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This process of cultural blending seems to have softened the once warlike Khitan, and in time they were challenged by a fiercer and more primitive Manchurian tribe, the Jurchen, who began to make war on them in 1115. In less than a decade the grip of the Khitan on northern China had been broken. The Liao Dynasty fell and the Jurchen ascended the imperial throne; nothing remained to mark Khitan rule in China except the name, “Khitai,” by which China still is known in Russian, Greek, and several other languages today. (The medieval “Cathay” is derived from the same word.)

In 1124, as the Liao Dynasty was collapsing, a member of the Khitan imperial family escaped with about two hundred followers into Central Asia, and, winning the support of the Turkish tribes that oc-
cupied the region, established the empire of Kara-Khitai, "Black Cathay." ("Black" appears to have been a term of honor and distinction in twelfth-century Turkish.) The founder of this empire was Yeh-li Ta-shih, born about 1087, a descendant in the eighth generation from the first Khitan Emperor of China. Yeh-li Ta-shih, according to the official Chinese history of the Liao Dynasty, was an outstanding horseman and archer, and in addition had a thorough grounding in Chinese literature; it also appears that he was a shrewd, ruthless man who, while other Khitan princes were planning a last-ditch effort against the Jurchen, made a quick and cool exit from China once he was convinced that his dynasty's cause was lost. In his new domain far to the west, he obtained the submission of a great many minor tribes whosechieftains recognized his superior powers of leadership, and rapidly created a kingdom composed largely of people of Turkish stock. In 1134 he made a half-hearted attempt to reconquer the Khitan possessions in China, but nothing came of it, and he abandoned the project; the real thrust of Yeh-li Ta-shih's imperial ideas was westward, ever deeper into Central Asia.

A collision between Kara-Khitai and the Seljuks of Persia was in the making for many years. It finally came on September 9, 1141, at Qatawan, near the rich city of Samarkand, which lay on the main caravan route between China and the Near East. Yeh-li Ta-shih's subjects had been raiding Samarkand for some time; at last the Khan of Samarkand, a Seljuk vassal, asked his master, the Sultan Sanjar, to come to his aid. Sanjar thereupon marched east from Persia at the head of a large army made up of Moslem troops drawn from many lands. Yeh-li Ta-shih met him with the army of Kara-Khitai, and in the battle that followed the Seljuks suffered a terrible defeat. Sanjar escaped, but his wife and many of his highest nobles were captured, and the power of the Persian Seljuks was seriously impaired.

Merchants traveling the ancient caravan routes carried the news of this battle westward, until within a year or two it must have reached the Crusader principalities in Syria, two thousand miles west of Samarkand. These Christian outposts would find good reason to rejoice in the smashing of an Islamic army by the forces of Kara-Khitai. Sanjar had been the pre-eminent Moslem warrior of his era, and, though all his military activities had been carried out in regions of Asia far removed from the Crusader lands, the downfall of the great Seljuk sultan removed a major potential menace at the Crusaders' backs. But how
strangely the story of Yeh-lü Ta-shih’s victory was transformed, in the
course of its journey from Samarkand to Syria! Sanjar the Seljuk was
turned into a pair of brothers, the “Samiardi.” Yeh-lü Ta-shih, who was
a Buddhist, had become Prester John—a Christian, a priest, and a Nes-
torian to boot. The scene of the battle had been shifted from distant
Samarkand to nearby Ecbatana, just on the far side of Mesopotamia
in western Persia, and it was said that Prester John had afterward come
even farther west, to the banks of the Tigris in Mesopotamia, in his
unsuccessful attempt to undertake the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Ac-
counting for these discrepancies has occupied the students of the
Prester John legend for more than a century and a half.

Some of them can be explained fairly easily, such as the cleaving
of Sanjar into brother-kings called “Samiardi.” In some manuscripts
of Otto’s chronicle this term is given as Saniardi, a recognizable plural
form of Sanjar, and perhaps this is the spelling that should be preferred.
The plural usage possibly is an acknowledgment of the Seljuk custom
of sharing power among brothers: the eleventh-century warrior Togrul
Beg, first of the great Seljuk sultans, ruled in conjunction with his
brother Chagri, and in the early twelfth century the Seljuk realm had
been divided among Sanjar and two of his brothers, although Sanjar
was the only one who still lived at the time of the battle at Samarkand.

Yeh-lü Ta-shih’s supposed Christianity, it seems fair to say, was
merely wishful thinking on the part of those who brought the story
westward. The official Chinese history of the Liao Dynasty explicitly
states that Yeh-lü Ta-shih received a classical academic Chinese edu-
cation, and it would have been most unusual for such a background to
have led him to Christianity; certainly, had he been a Christian, that
fact would have been noted in the dynastic annals. Instead, the dynas-
tic history reveals that in 1130, while setting out on a military expedi-
tion, Yeh-lü Ta-shih “sacrificed a gray ox and a white horse to Heaven
and Earth and to his ancestors,” which does not sound like the practice
of a Christian. In all probability he was loyal to the shamanistic tribal
religion of the Khitan, and also, like many of the Liao Dynasty nobles,
had embraced Buddhism. But there certainly were Christian tribes in
Central Asia in his day—most notably the Keraits, a Mongol tribe living
south and east of Lake Baikal. In 1007–08 missionaries from Syria, ac-
companying a party of merchants, had converted the chieftain of the
Keraits and many of his people to the Nestorian form of Christianity,
an event that was widely publicized in the Near East. It is not hard to
see that the Christian travelers who spread the news of Sanjar's defeat would readily assume that anyone making war against Moslems must surely be a Christian; and, having claimed Yeh-lü Ta-shih for their own faith, they would necessarily have concluded that Sanjar's "Christian" vanquisher was likely to be one of those Central Asian Nestorians of whom so much had been heard.

Since Yeh-lü Ta-shih never came as far west as Ecbatana (he apparently remained in the vicinity of Samarkand after defeating Sanjar, and died in 1143 or 1144), there is no ready explanation for the transplantation of his battle with Sanjar from Samarkand to the Persian city. This may have been an error of the sort that often arises when a tale is told and retold many times, undergoing slight distortions at each new telling.

The most complex of the story's mutations is the most significant one of all, that which produced for Yeh-lü Ta-shih the name that Otto of Freising rendered as "Presbyter Ioannes," or "Prester John." During his career the Khitan prince used a variety of titles, but none of them can convincingly be interpreted as any form of "Ioannes" or "John," though scholars have tried to make several fit the phonetic mold. When first he fled into Central Asia after the Liao collapse, Yeh-lü Ta-shih awarded himself the title of wang, or "king" in Chinese, which Khitan chieftains had used since the late seventh century. Later, when his new realm had grown considerably, he bestowed on himself the Chinese imperial title, huang ti, "august sovereign," to indicate his kinship with the fallen Liao Dynasty. As emperor he adopted a formal imperial name in the Chinese manner—T'ien-yu. The dynastic annals show that Yeh-lü Ta-shih, while emperor, employed still another title of honor, by which he was more widely known. This was rendered in Chinese characters as ko-erh-han, and in the Mongol-Turkish speech of his subjects as gur-khan. It can best be translated as "supreme ruler."

Much ingenuity has been expended to conjure "John" or "Ioannes" out of this roster of names and titles. Gustav Oppert, who in 1864 published the first extensive examination of the Prester John myth, argued that gur-khan, softened in West Turkish pronunciation to yur-khan, had undergone a subtle change while the story was making its way westward, emerging finally as Yochanan, which is the Hebrew form of "John." This theory has a convincing ring, but acceptance of it is hampered by the ease with which so many other possible derivations of the name of Prester John can be constructed. In the 1930s, for example,
the Italian medievalist Leonardo Olschki, rejecting Oppert's *gur-khan* derivation, suggested that Yeh-lü Ta-shih was known by the composite title of *wang-khan*, made up of the Chinese and Mongol words for "king": "The term was changed to Johannan by the Nestorians of Central Asia, who passed it on in this form, as a proper name, to their fellow believers and the other Christians of western Asia," Olschki wrote. Not only is it difficult to find a phonetic resemblance between *wang-khan* and Johannan, however, but Olschki's entire line of reasoning is gravely injured by the fact that nowhere in contemporary documents can Yeh-lü Ta-shih be found mentioned by the title of *wang-khan*. That title was indeed used by a Central Asian ruler, as we will see—a genuine Nestorian, far more suited to wear the mantle of Prester John than Yeh-lü Ta-shih; but the earliest known usage of the title dates from fifty years after Bishop Hugh's journey to Viterbo.

In 1876 the Russian scholar Philipp Bruun published a work entitled *The Migrations of Prester John*, in which he challenged the whole notion that Bishop Hugh's story was a distorted version of the exploits of Yeh-lü Ta-shih. According to Bruun, the prototype of Prester John was the general Ivané (John) Orbelian, commander-in-chief of the army of the kingdom of Georgia. This John Orbelian is one of his country's national heroes, who fought valiantly for many years to drive the Turks from the Caucasus. In 1123–24 he recaptured from the Seljuks a wide strip of territory in eastern Georgia, including the cities of Tiflis and Ani, and his grateful monarch, King David the Restorer, bestowed on him large grants of land in the reconquered region.

Bruun raised the interesting point that Otto of Freising apparently confused the Georgian city of Ani with the old Persian city of Ecbatana. In a passage of Otto's chronicle somewhat earlier than the Prester John anecdote, Otto, in providing some geographical information apparently received from Bishop Hugh, remarked, "The kings of the Persians . . . have themselves established the seat of their kingdom at Ecbatana, which . . . in their tongue is called *Hani*." The defeat of the Seljuks at Ani in 1123 thus begins to seem a more plausible source for Prester John's victory at Ecbatana than does the triumph of Yeh-lü Ta-shih outside Samarkand. Moreover, John Orbelian was a Christian—Greek Orthodox, though, and not Nestorian. And, though he was neither a king nor a priest, the Georgian general did conduct himself in regal fashion: he dined on silver dishes, had the privilege of sitting on a couch at royal banquets while other princes sat merely on cush-
ions, and the Orbelian family held the hereditary right to preside over the coronations of Georgia’s kings. As for the “Samiardi” whom Prester John defeated, it was true that Orbelian had never done battle against Sultan Sanjar, but there were two other Seljuks who could qualify as Bishop Hugh’s brother-kings: Sanjar’s nephews Mas’ud and Da’ud, one of whom was the chief administrator of western Persia and the other of Seljuk-occupied Armenia and Azerbaijan. There is no record of Orbelian’s actually having vanquished these princes on the battlefield, but he certainly engaged in battle with the soldiers of Da’ud, if not with Da’ud himself, during his campaigns of 1123–24. Lastly, Bruun pointed out, Georgia lies not too far to the north of Syria and the Holy Land, and it is considerably more likely that the Crusaders would have looked to John Orbelian for military aid than to the Gur-Khan of Kara-Khitai. It would even have been necessary for Orbelian to cross the Tigris in journeying from Georgia to Jerusalem.

Despite the cleverness of Bruun’s reasoning, his identification of John Orbelian as the prototype of Prester John never attained wide acceptance. Though Orbelian’s career fit the requirements of the story in many minor ways, it failed to coincide with the major ones: he was not a king or a priest, nor had he fought any single climactic battle in which a huge Moslem army had been destroyed, nor had he vanquished the brother-kings of Persia, nor could he claim descent from the Three Magi of the Gospel, nor did he wield an emerald scepter. It seems mere coincidence, then, that this Georgian warrior can be made to seem the model for Prester John.

How are we to explain, in that case, the discordant features of Bishop Hugh’s narrative?

Perhaps we would do best to regard that narrative as a blend of fact and fantasy, a synthesis of history and legend. Its basis is an authentic event: the smashing of Sanjar the Seljuk’s army near the city of Samarkand in 1141 by Yeh-lü Ta-shih, the Gur-Khan of Kara-Khitai. To this was welded another indisputable datum: the existence of Christian settlements, most of them of the Nestorian creed, in remote and obscure regions of the Far East. From these two nuclei sprang the romantic concept of a Christian monarch of the Far East, who combined in his person the dignities of king and priest, as in fact was not uncommon in the Orient. Mythical attributes now were attached to this warlike presbyter: an emerald scepter, descent from the Magi. For a storyteller to credit Prester John with a scepter of emerald would be
no great feat of imagination, but indeed a source of inspiration must have been close at hand in The Thousand and One Nights, which already was in wide oral circulation in the Near East. On the sixth voyage of Sindbad the Sailor, he comes to the isle of Sarandib—which can be identified with Ceylon—and observes that the king’s attendant is carrying “a great mace of gold, at the top of which is an emerald a span in length, and of the thickness of a thumb.” The legendary wealth of Prester John may spring in part from Sindbad’s account of the opulence of the court of Sarandib. As for Prester John’s connection with the Three Magi, that may be derived, as will shortly be demonstrated, from another body of legend having to do with the Christians of the Far East. The name John itself may also be drawn from that group of myths.

Thus, by a circuitous process of accretion, the story of Prester John’s victory over the Persian kings reached the Crusader lands, somewhat embellished and transmogrified, a year or two after the battle near Samarkand. The worried Latins of the Near East, seeing the Saracen menace on their borders growing more threatening all the time, quite naturally indulged in the pleasant hope that this valiant Christian warrior would one day bring his legions to the defense of Jerusalem. When Edessa fell to the Turks in 1144, and Bishop Hugh of Jabala set out to obtain reinforcements in western Europe, it became necessary to add one more strand to the story: Prester John’s unsuccessful attempt to reach the Holy Land. Touring Europe in 1145, Bishop Hugh made it clear to the princes of Christendom that no help could be expected in the Near East from Prester John; and, the metamorphoses of the tale now being complete, Otto of Freising embedded it in his chronicle.

Christianity originated in Palestine, spread quickly to Syria, was carried by missionaries to Asia Minor and Greece, and took deep root in Rome, all during the first century after the Crucifixion. One hundred years later there were Christian churches throughout the length of the vast Roman Empire, from Egypt to Gaul and Britain. By the early fourth century Christianity was the official religion of Rome, and the whole Mediterranean world was penetrated by the teachings of Jesus.
While the structure of the Church was thus taking form in Europe and the Near East, Christianity also was traveling to the farther Orient, through Mesopotamia and Persia to India and even China. The immensities of the distances involved and the difficulties of communication after the breakdown of the Roman imperial system left these Oriental Christians cut off from the Western centers of the faith, so that their theological concepts developed along radically different lines; and by the year 1100 the Christians of the Orient had come to seem strange, unreal, and virtually mythical to their brethren in the West. It was out of this fantasy-shrouded Oriental Christianity that the essential features of the Prester John legend arose, and it is impossible for us to understand the convolutions of that legend without a detailed examination of the course taken by Christianity in the Far East, particularly in the fabled land of India.

The traditional founder of Indian Christianity was St. Thomas, the apostle who doubted the resurrection of Jesus, he who said upon hearing that Jesus had left his tomb, “Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.” The story of Thomas’ career in India is told in an apocryphal work, the vivid, romantic Acts of Thomas, which apparently dates from the first part of the third century. This extraordinary tale, probably composed at the city of Edessa in eastern Asia Minor, was written in Syriac, one of the dialects of the Semitic language known as Aramaic, which was spoken in much of the Near East in the early Christian Era; Syriac remains to this day the liturgical language of several Oriental Christian sects. Later the book was translated into Greek, Latin, Armenian, and several other languages, and achieved great popularity throughout the Christian world.

The Acts declares that after the Crucifixion the disciples of Jesus divided the world into missionary regions, and it fell to Thomas to carry the faith to India. The apostle was unwilling to go, saying that his health was too poor and that he could speak only Hebrew; it was necessary for Jesus to appear and to sell the reluctant Thomas as a slave to a merchant from India named Habban, whose master, King Gundafor of India, had sent him to Palestine to obtain a skilled carpenter. Habban and Thomas sailed to India, and, when they arrived at Gundafor’s court, the monarch asked Thomas if he would build him a new palace. Reluctant no longer, the apostle replied, “Yes, I shall build it,
and finish it; for because of this I have come, to build and to do carpenter's work."

Gundafor provided Thomas with a large sum to cover the cost of the construction. However, Thomas chose to distribute this money among the needy, which so infuriated the king that he had the apostle flogged and imprisoned. Gundafor's brother Gad, sorely distressed by Thomas' squandering of the royal treasury, took to his bed and died of chagrin, and was carried off to heaven. On his journey heavenward Gad beheld a magnificent palace and asked the name of its owner; he was told that the palace was that of Gundafor, and its architect was the Apostle Thomas. Gad then asked permission to return to worldly life, so that he could tell his brother of the splendid palace that awaited him in the heavenly realms. This request was granted, and, after hearing the story of the celestial palace from Gad, Gundafor urged Thomas to receive him into Christianity. The apostle baptized both Gundafor and Gad, and many of the subjects of the Indian king.

After some further miraculous adventures among Gundafor's people, Thomas was invited to visit the land of a king named Mazdai—a Persian name, though the Acts indicates that Mazdai's kingdom was in another part of India. Here Thomas converted to the Christian faith King Mazdai's wife Tertia and their son Vizan, whom he ordained a deacon. Thomas preached the virtues of celibacy to such effect that Tertia withdrew from the king's bed. Enraged, Mazdai ordered Thomas to persuade Tertia to return to him; this Thomas refused to do, whereupon the angry monarch sent four soldiers to put the apostle to death. Before he was slain, Thomas entrusted the Christian Church in India to the young deacon Vizan and to an Indian named Sifur, whom Thomas had ordained a priest. The martyred apostle was buried by Vizan, Sifur, and his other disciples in a tomb where former kings had been interred. King Mazdai later opened Thomas' grave but could not find the martyr's bones, "for one of the brethren had taken them away secretly and carried them into the regions of the West." Afterward the repentant Mazdai embraced Christianity and his kingdom became an important center of the faith in India.

How much of this story can be accepted as a genuine historical record? To the native Christian population of India, virtually all of it must be regarded as an accurate documentary account of the origin of their religious heritage. Several hundred thousand Christians still live along India's Malabar Coast—southwestern India, southwest from
Goa—and call themselves “the Christians of St. Thomas.” Most of them acknowledge the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch as their spiritual leader, though some belong to the Syrian Roman Catholic Church, which acknowledges the supremacy of the Pope. All, however, trace their faith to the missionary work done by St. Thomas. They place the date of his arrival in India at A.D. 52, and in December 1952, Syrian Christians everywhere celebrated the nineteen hundredth anniversary of his death. Just one piece of evidence exists to confirm the authenticity of the tale of Thomas’ visit to India. The name of King Gundafor is found in no document of the Western world other than the Acts of Thomas. In the nineteenth century, however, archaeologists discovered that this king actually existed and was approximately contemporary with Thomas. Coins in first-century style bearing the Indian form of his name—Gudaphara—were unearthed in the Indus Valley, and an inscription at Peshawar indicated that his reign had lasted at least twenty-six years; historians now place it as from A.D. 19 to 45.

St. Thomas may well have been the one who brought Christianity to India. Beyond doubt it would have been possible for him to make such a voyage, for in his time there was considerable sea traffic between the Near East and India: out of Egypt down the Red Sea to Arabia, and around the coasts of the Arabian Sea to India’s western coast, or else by land across Syria to the Euphrates, and down the river to the Persian Gulf, which gives access to the Arabian Sea. Some historians of the Church feel, though, that whatever Christian outposts St. Thomas may have managed to found in India were short-lived, and that the large Christian population there stems from missionary activity of a later time.

Certainly there were Christians there in the sixth century. Our authority for that is a sixth-century monk, Kosmas of Alexandria, surnamed Indicopleustes, “the Indian traveler.” Kosmas had been a mariner before taking holy orders and had visited India, Ceylon, and Ethiopia; about 530, while dwelling in a monastery on Mount Sinai, he produced a bizarre geographical work, the Christian Topography, which is a strange mixture of factual information and grotesque theories about the shape and nature of the world. Concerning the island of Ceylon, which is immediately south of India, he declares, “The island has also a church of Persian Christians who have settled there, and a Presbyter who is appointed from Persia, and a Deacon and a complete ecclesiastical ritual. But the natives and their kings are heathens.”
Speaking of India proper, Kosmas says, "In the country called Malè [Malabar], where the pepper grows, there is also a church, and at another place called Calliana [Kalyana, near Bombay] there is moreover a bishop, who is appointed from Persia. In the island, again, called the Island of Dioscorides [Socotra], which is situated in the same Indian sea, and where the inhabitants speak Greek, having been originally colonists sent thither by the Ptolemies who succeeded Alexander the Macedonian, there are clergy who receive their ordination in Persia, and are sent on to the island, and there is also a multitude of Christians. I sailed along the coast of this island, but did not land upon it. I met, however, with some of its Greek-speaking people who had come over into Ethiopia. And so likewise among the Bactrians and Huns and Persians, and the rest of the Indians, Persarmenians, and Medes and Elamites, and throughout the whole land of Persia there is no limit to the number of churches with bishops and very large communities of Christian people, as well as many martyrs, and monks living also as hermits."

These Christians of the Orient whom Kosmas describes were Nestorians, although the modern Christians of St. Thomas no longer adhere to the Nestorian rite, most of them having been affiliated since the seventeenth century with either the Roman Catholic or Monophysite factions of the Church. The origin of these factions lies in the stormy theological disputes that repeatedly split Christianity in the years when it was first developing into a religion of major significance.

The early church fathers differed most bitterly over the nature of the relationship of Jesus Christ to God. Was Jesus himself divine, or merely a human prophet through whom God had spoken? Was he the son of a mortal man and woman or the son of God? Should he be worshiped as God’s equal? If one spoke of a Holy Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—was one worshiping one god or three? By the fourth century, angry feuding over these points threatened to divide the Church into rival and hostile branches. This was contrary to the policy of the Roman Emperor Constantine, who, having successfully brought the immense Roman Empire under his sole control after a period in which it was ruled by a committee of emperors governing different sections, had chosen Christianity to be the state religion in the hope of imposing yet another level of unity on the realm. In 325, therefore, Constantine summoned the leaders of the Church to an “ecumenical,” or universal, council over which he would preside, at which
an attempt would be made to arrive at a commonly acceptable definition of the nature of Jesus. The city of Rome had long since lost its place as the chief capital of the empire, and Constantine, who spent most of his time in the eastern half of his domain, was then in the process of building a grand new capital to be known as Constantinople at the gateway to the Black Sea. Since Constantinople was still unfinished, the emperor chose Nicaea, in nearby Asia Minor, as the site of the ecumenical council.

The chief theological business of the Council of Nicaea was a debate over the teachings of Arius, a priest of Alexandria in Egypt. Arius was unable to accept the idea that Jesus was fully divine, the equal of God Himself. That notion seemed to him dangerously close to the assertion that Christians worship more than one god. If Jesus were the son of God, Arius insisted, there must have been a time when Jesus did not exist, and therefore he could not be God's equal, but rather merely a messenger who had been sent to this world to instill the love of God in mankind. This doctrine had won many followers, particularly in Egypt and other Near Eastern lands. However, the majority of bishops insisted that Jesus was both man and god, and that one could not be a true Christian without acknowledging his divine nature. By a nearly unanimous vote the council denounced Arianism as a heresy—an unacceptable and forbidden doctrine—and decreed that the Father and the Son were *homoousios,* “of the same substance.”

The next challenge to orthodoxy arose about a century later, coming from Nestorius, a Syrian-born priest who in 428 had been elevated to the rank of Patriarch of Constantinople. By this time the Roman Empire had been partitioned into eastern and western realms, and the Patriarch of Constantinople was the highest ecclesiastical figure of the eastern (or Byzantine) sector, regarded by all Christians of the East as on a level of parity with the Pope. Nestorius made use of his position to promote the thesis that Christ had had two distinct natures, one human, one divine. Mary, he said, had been merely the mother of the mortal Jesus, and so it was improper to hail her as “Mother of God.” Only later in life had Christ taken on a divine nature. Not only did Nestorius attempt to divide Jesus into two persons, a man and a god, but he stressed the lesson for mankind to be found in the Saviour’s human life of growth, temptation, and suffering. Orthodox Christians found Nestorius’ humanization of Jesus intolerable, and at the request of the Pope another ecumenical council was called at
Ephesus, in Asia Minor, to deal with it. This council met in 431, and, after unusually violent debates, the Nestorian teachings were condemned, Nestorius himself being forced into retirement.

The doctrines of Nestorius, however, had attracted many followers east of Constantinople. A school of Nestorian theology flourished at Edessa until 489, when it was closed by order of the Byzantine Emperor Zeno; the Nestorian professors then moved eastward across the border into Persia, which had already been considerably penetrated by their teachings. Persia thereupon became the chief center of Nestorianism, virtually the entire Christian community there accepting its tenets and severing contact with the orthodox Christianity of the West. Syriac-speaking Nestorian missionaries carried their beliefs to neighboring lands, and churches of the Nestorian rite were established in eastern Syria, Arabia, and Mesopotamia. Nestorians also reached the coast of India at some time prior to the voyage of Kosmas Indicopleustes, and succeeded in imparting their ideas to the existing congregations of the Christians of St. Thomas. (Or, if Christianity had perished in India since St. Thomas' day, the Nestorians converted heathens to their faith.) By the early eighth century there were colonies of Nestorian Christians in China as well.

When the Arabs began their conquest of the Near East in the middle of the seventh century, therefore, they found Nestorian Christianity well entrenched. Mohammed himself had had instruction from a Nestorian monk in Arabia, and he gave the Church the status of a privileged minority, allowing it to function without interference after Persia came under Arab rule in 651. When Baghdad became the capital of the Moslem world in the latter part of the eighth century, the Catholicos of the East, as the head of the Nestorian hierarchy was known, transferred his headquarters to that city. Under Arab protection, Nestorian scholars carried out a great deal of important work, particularly in the translation of Greek scientific and philosophical treatises into Arabic; thus they played a significant role in the remarkable cultural development of the Arabs in the ninth and tenth centuries. The Church of the East—that has always been the official name of the Nestorians—continued to expand, and by the end of the tenth century its hierarchy was divided into fifteen provinces, ten within the Moslem world and the others in China, India, and Central Asia. Penetration of Nestorian missionaries to the Mongol steppes early in the eleventh century resulted in the celebrated conversion of the Kerait tribe. Dur-
ing all this time the Church of the East had no dealings whatever with Western Christendom, and its rites and sacraments came to differ considerably from those promulgated in Rome and Constantinople: veneration of the Virgin Mary was forbidden, the worship of images and holy ikons likewise, and services were performed in the Syriac tongue.

Nestorianism was not the only heresy that successfully established itself in the face of condemnation by the orthodox leaders of the Church. After the Council of Ephesus of 431, a monk named Eutyches proposed a doctrine that was so extreme in its opposition to Nestorianism that a new ecumenical council had to be called in 451 to protect Christians once again against heresy. Eutyches' teaching, known as the doctrine of Monophysitism, held that it was folly to think of Christ as having been a man at all; his human nature had been so consumed in the divine that it was sufficient to regard the Saviour as having had but one nature, a divine one.

This Monophysite belief in a wholly divine Christ quickly won a host of adherents in Egypt and western Syria. To the orthodox, though, it was just as unacceptable as the Arians' belief in a human Christ and the Nestorians' belief in a Christ of dual nature, and the ecumenical council, held just across the Bosphorus from Constantinople at Chalcedon, proclaimed Eutyches' theology to be heretical. The Council of Chalcedon offered a new formula which said, "Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood . . . made known in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." Yet the Monophysite beliefs could not be eradicated. Syrian Monophysites contemptuously referred to orthodox Syrians as "Melkites," that is, "the king's men," because they remained in communion with the church that was supported by their ruler, the Byzantine emperor. Rejecting the authority of the orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, the Syrian Monophysites set up their own patriarch in the same city. The division prevails to this day, Syria having one patriarch whose church is in communion with the Greek and other Eastern Orthodox churches, and another who presides over the Syrian Orthodox Church, which is Monophysite.

The same split occurred in fifth-century Egypt. Those Egyptians who spoke Greek and were loyal to Byzantine rule remained orthodox—"Melkites." Those who had never willingly accepted Byzantine authority, and who still spoke Coptic, the ancient language of Pharaonic
times, became Monophysites. Two rival patriarchs thus presided in Alexandria. The Arabs, when they conquered Egypt in the seventh century, did not interfere in internal Christian affairs, but nevertheless many Melkites found it advantageous to convert to a church distinguished by its opposition to Egypt's former Byzantine masters, and the Coptic Church, as the Egyptian Monophysite faction called itself, came to include a majority of Egypt's Christians. The Coptic Church also was responsible for the planting of Christianity in nearby Ethiopia, which thereby became another outpost of Monophysite belief.

The orthodox Christian world itself underwent serious dissension during the centuries when the Nestorian and Monophysite heresies were establishing themselves in the East. The problem sprang from the struggle for power between the Pope, or Bishop of Rome, and the Patriarch of Constantinople. The division of the old Roman Empire in 395 into two independently governed realms had created a natural rivalry between these powerful prelates, which intensified after the western empire dissolved late in the fifth century into an array of small barbarian-ruled kingdoms. Traditionally, the Bishop of Rome had been head of the Church; but now the Patriarch of Constantinople could argue that he still presided over the true Roman Empire of the Caesars, for Byzantium was the only seat of imperial power left, while the Pope was merely a bishop with local supremacy in the chaotic West. By 484 matters were so critical that the Pope excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople, and the patriarch responded by declaring that the Pope had no authority over the Eastern Church. Occasional attempts were made to heal the breach, but relations between the two branches of orthodoxy were rarely amiable, and the final break came in 1054, after a quarrel over relatively minor matters of ritual. Michael Cerularius, the Byzantine patriarch, attacked the Roman Church on such questions as the mixing of water in the sacramental wine, the use of unleavened bread in communion, and the marriage of clergymen. Pope Leo IX responded to the aggressive patriarch by sending an equally aggressive Italian ecclesiastic, Cardinal Humbert, to Constantinople to defend Roman practices. Soon the two were engaged in a furious quarrel involving personal abuse of the most insulting kind. Finally, on July 16, 1054, Humbert and his fellow delegates from Rome entered Constantinople's great cathedral, Hagia Sophia, and laid on the altar a document in Latin that pronounced dire curses upon "Michael the pseudo-patriarch," his fellow clergymen, "and all who fol-
low them in the heresies aforesaid and the crimes aforesaid.” The Romans then hurriedly left the Byzantine capital. Patriarch Michael promptly pronounced equally resonant curses against the heads of the Church of Rome, and with that display of mutual ill temper all contact between the Greek and Latin branches of Christianity was severed. Efforts at reconciliation were sporadically made, but they were futile. The two churches drifted rapidly apart in many aspects of ritual and doctrine, while each firmly maintained that it alone was the true Christian Church, in apostolic succession to the original disciples of Jesus. (The curses uttered in 1054 were not retracted until December of 1965, when Pope Paul VI and the Patriarch Athenagoras resolved to work toward some form of harmony between Eastern and Western Christianity; however, this ecumenical movement has shown few tangible results since then.)

A twelfth-century Christian such as Bishop Hugh of Jabala thus inhabited a world of fragmented faith. In western Europe the Roman Catholic Church was supreme, from the shores of the Mediterranean northward to the frosty land of the wild Norsemen, and from the British Isles eastward to Italy. In eastern Europe, though, from what now is Yugoslavia to the coast of the Black Sea, the Greek-speaking Emperor of Byzantium held sway, and ecclesiastical affairs were under the authority of his appointee, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople. At the eastern end of the Mediterranean, on the Syrian and Palestinian coasts, were a few tiny enclaves of Roman Catholicism: the Crusader states. But the native Christians of the Near East owed no allegiance to the Pope of the Latins. Some were “king’s men,” loyal even now to the Byzantine Church. Most, though, espoused doctrines that both the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches branded as heresies. In Egypt, Armenia, and western Syria they were Monophysites. In eastern Syria they were Nestorians.

Surrounding the Near East, with its tangle of conflicting Christian sects, lay Islam like a scimitar, cutting Europe off from all knowledge of farther Asia. The Arabs, who first had erupted into this region in the seventh century when all of it was part of the Byzantine Empire, still controlled Egypt, North Africa, and some of the key cities of Syria and Palestine that never had fallen to the Crusaders. Most of the Monophysite Christians lived under their rule. The Seljuk Turks, who had supplanted the Arabs as conquerors in many places, ruled in certain other parts of Syria, such as the cities of Aleppo and Damascus;
they had also lately reconquered from the Crusaders the region around Edessa, where Syria met Asia Minor; and they were masters of Mesopotamia and Persia, the two territories immediately east of the Crusader states. From the point of view of the western European Christian, the Seljuk-held country on the far side of the Euphrates was as remote and inaccessible as the moon, and the Nestorian Christians who lived in the Seljuk domain were alien beings, who might just as well have been moon-men for all that Europe knew of their way of life.

Beyond the Seljuk realm, everything dissolved, for a western European, into mist and myth. Somewhere to the east, out past Persia, there supposedly were great empires, and supposedly too there were Christian lands, but scarcely anything was known of them. Even their names were mysteries. Anyone familiar with the Orient knew of India, because it was mentioned in the Acts of Thomas, but no European could say precisely where India might be, and the name was applied loosely to many regions east of Persia, or often to the entire Far East. There once had been contact between Byzantium and China, in the seventh and eighth centuries, when China was enjoying a golden age under the T'ang Dynasty. But the T'ang had fallen under a barbarian onslaught in the early tenth century, and during the reign of the Khitan emperors of the Liao Dynasty the trade routes between China and the West had been snapped, so that in Bishop Hugh's time Europe had only the haziest of information about the far-off land of "Cathay," which was thought to be somewhere near India, or perhaps a part of it. In this epoch of geographical vagueness, the belief in Nestorian Christian kingdoms of the remote Orient came to glow like a brilliant beacon on the eastern horizon; and the apocryphal accounts of the missionary activities of St. Thomas in India served to lay the foundation on which the legend of the invincible priest-king Prester John arose.

Long before the Prester John story made its appearance in Europe, Christians everywhere had come to regard the burial place of St. Thomas as a shrine where miracles regularly occurred, and revered it as a place of holy pilgrimage. There were, however, two shrines of St. Thomas, one in India and one at Edessa, each claiming to hold the authentic relics of the apostle's body.
Of the Indian shrine, of course, no European of the twelfth century had exact knowledge. Several travelers of early medieval times had claimed to have reached it, but the accounts of their journeys lack substantial detail. St. Gregory of Tours, who lived in the latter part of the sixth century, wrote in his *De Gloria Martyrum* that one Theodore had undertaken a pilgrimage to India, returning to declare, "In India is a place where the body of the Blessed Apostle Thomas was resting first, and in that place there is a monastery and a church of a wondrous size and elaborate architecture and decoration. In this sanctuary our Lord performs a great miracle. An oil lamp stands in front of the burial place and illuminates it constantly day and night and it burns without being refilled; neither wind nor accident can extinguish it and yet the oil does not decrease." And the twelfth-century English chronicler William of Malmesbury noted in his *De Gestis Regum Anglorum* that in the year 883 King Alfred, "being addicted to giving of alms... sent many gifts beyond the seas unto Rome, and unto [the shrine of] St. Thomas in India. His messenger in this business was Sighelm, Bishop of Sherborne, who with great prosperity (which is a matter to be wondered at in this our age) traveled through India, and returning home brought with him many strange and splendid gems, and aromatic oils and spices, such as that country plentifully yields." However, the first Western traveler who unquestionably visited the shrine of St. Thomas in India was the indefatigable Venetian Marco Polo, who saw it late in the thirteenth century while on his way home from his stay at the court of the Emperor Kublai Khan in China. Marco found the shrine not on India's Malabar or western coast, where the Christians of St. Thomas have always been most heavily concentrated, but on the eastern one, then known by the Arabic name of Maabar. His account declares, "The body of Messer St. Thomas the Apostle lies in this province of Maabar at a certain little town having no great population; 'tis a place where few traders go, because there is very little merchandise to be got there, and it is a place not very accessible. Both Christians [native to India] and Saracens, however, greatly frequent it in pilgrimage. For the Saracens do also hold the saint in great reverence, and say that he was one of their own Saracens and a great prophet, giving him the title of Avarian, which is as much as to say 'Holy Man.' The Christians who go thither in pilgrimage take of the earth from the place where the saint was killed, and give a portion thereof to anyone who is sick of a quartan or a tertian fever; and by the power of God.
and of St. Thomas the sick man is instantly cured." Marco goes on to speak of several miracles credited to the saint, describes the apostle's death (by accident, according to Marco, and not through martyrdom), and mentions that before coming to India Thomas had served as a missionary in Nubia.

The place Marco Polo visited was undoubtedly Mylapur, now a suburb of the city of Madras, which the Christians of St. Thomas continue to venerate as the place of their patron's death. An ancient shrine of St. Thomas existed at Mylapur when the Portuguese came to India at the beginning of the sixteenth century; finding it half in ruins, they erected a new one on a hill not far away. In 1522 a Portuguese commission excavated at Mylapur for the bones of St. Thomas, located them, and transferred them to Goa, the capital of Portuguese India, where they still are preserved in that city's Church of St. Thomas.

According to the apocryphal Acts of Thomas, though, the apostle's body did not remain at the place of his death in India but were secretly taken away by one of his followers and carried into "the regions of the West." Both of the sixth-century Latin translations of the Acts specifically state that Thomas' remains were taken to Edessa, the great center of Syrian Christianity, where Nestorianism would later win its first partisans. Etheria, an abbess from Gaul who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land about A.D. 386, saw the shrine of St. Thomas at Edessa and reported that "his body is laid entire." The theologian St. Ephraim, who died in 373, suggested in one of his works that the body of St. Thomas might be resting in India and at Edessa simultaneously. There is indeed the possibility that the apostle's bones were divided, part remaining at the place of his martyrdom in Mylapur, and part being transferred to Edessa. Western Christians appear to have regarded both shrines as equally sacred. St. Gregory of Tours, writing in the sixth century and relaying the story of the pilgrim Theodore's journey to India, clearly indicates that the shrine in India is the place where the apostle first was buried, but that his remains since had gone to Edessa; Theodore had been to that shrine too, and witnessed another miracle there, the sudden increase of water in the city's wells at the time of the annual feast of St. Thomas. Edessa continued to display the relics of St. Thomas until 1142, when, with the chances of a Seljuk conquest of the city increasing, the saint's bones were transferred for safekeeping to the Aegean island of
Chios; in 1258 they were moved again, to the cathedral of the Italian city of Ortona, where they still remain. The Roman Catholic Church apparently recognizes the Ortona relics as the authentic bones of the apostle, relegating the bones at Goa dug up by the Portuguese to a condition of highly uncertain sanctity.

The miraculous nature of St. Thomas' shrine in India was described in detail in two twelfth-century texts, both of which contributed themes to the developing legend of Prester John. One of these is an anonymous Latin tract, *De adventu patriarchae Indorum ad Urbem sub Calixto papa secundo* (“On the Arrival of the Patriarch of the Indians in Rome under Pope Calixtus II”), and the other is a letter from Odo of Rheims, Abbot of St. Remy, to a certain Count Thomas, which also speaks of the visit of a prelate of India to Rome, and of his meeting with the Pope. *De adventu* declares that this meeting took place during the fourth year of the pontificate of Calixtus II, that is, the year beginning February 1122. The letter of Odo gives no year but fixes the date of the event at May 5.

According to the unknown author of *De adventu*, this Patriarch of the Indians, whose name was John, left his homeland so that he might travel to Constantinople, pay homage to the Greek Orthodox patriarch there, and receive from him his pallium, the ecclesiastical vestment that is a high prelate's badge of office. The journey from India to Constantinople is said to have taken a year. While at the Byzantine capital, Patriarch John encountered ambassadors from the Pope, who had come to try to heal the breach between the Greek and Roman Churches. After speaking with these Latin churchmen awhile, John asked to be allowed to go in their company back to Rome, so that he might be introduced to the Pope. This request was granted, and when he reached Rome John was entertained by Calixtus II and many of his cardinals at the Lateran Palace, where, through an interpreter, he offered a lengthy description of his native country.

The city over which he presides, said Patriarch John, is called Hulna. It is the capital of India, and is so large that a journey around its circumference would take four days; the wall that protects it is of such a size that two Roman chariots could be driven side by side along its top. Through the heart of the city flows the river Physon, which is described in the second chapter of Genesis as being one of the four great rivers that emanate from Eden. The clear waters of the Physon "cast forth most precious gold and gems, which make the regions of
India passing rich." No one but an orthodox Christian may live in Hulna; if an unbeliever or heretic comes there, "either he speedily comes to his senses or falls by sudden chance into mortal sickness." Outside the city's wall there is a lofty mountain, wholly surrounded by the waters of a deep lake, and at the summit of this peak is the mother church of St. Thomas the Apostle. On the shores of the lake are twelve monasteries.

Throughout the year the lake renders the mountain and its church inaccessible by foot, nor does anyone dare to approach by boat; but, eight days before the feast day of St. Thomas, the volume of the lake diminishes, "so that it is difficult to discern that water had been there," and "from every quarter there comes thither a concourse of people, believers and unbelievers, from distant parts, all sick, confidently expecting remedy and cure, by the merit of the blessed Apostle Thomas, for their infirmities." The church contains a "holy of holies, marvelously wrought, constructed of gold and silver and decorated with various precious stones, such as the same river of Paradise, called Physon, casts up. Within is a very precious silver shell which hangs by silver chains, a precious metal indeed, but more worthy is the treasure deposited within. For there, as on the day on which it was placed there, is still preserved the holy body of the apostle, unchanged and uncorrupted." He stands erect as in life, and before him hangs a golden lamp full of balsam, suspended by silver cords; since the day it was lit, the lamp has never gone out, nor has the balsam diminished. On the day of the feast of St. Thomas, the patriarch enters the shrine and withdraws some of that oil, anointing with it the ill, who straightaway are healed.

Accompanied by his bishops, the patriarch then solemnly opens the silver shell that holds St. Thomas' body, and, "in much fear and with great reverence," they place the apostle's body in a golden chair by the altar. "The face shines like a star, having red hair hanging almost down to the shoulders, a red beard, curly but not long, the whole appearance being beautiful to behold: the clothes as firm and whole as when they were first put on." They proceed now to celebrate the Mass; the patriarch brings the consecrated wafers to St. Thomas in a golden dish, and, kneeling, offers them to the saint, who, "by dispensation of the Creator, receives them in his extended right hand so carefully that one would take him to be not dead but living. Having received them, he keeps them in his extended palm, offering them freely to each." The whole gathering advances, and one by one each worshiper receives the
wafer from the saint, except only that if a sinner or infidel or heretic should draw near, the saint will close his hand. "Such a sinner cannot evade him. Either then and there he repents and in penitence receives the communion from the apostle, or before he leaves that place he dies. Which many infidels perceiving and, terrified by the dread of so great a miracle, leave the error of their heathenism and are at once converted to the faith of Christ, and, demanding without ceasing the water of sanctification, are with one accord baptized in the name of the holy and undivided Trinity." When this has been done, and all the other holy rites and mysteries pertaining to the feast of St. Thomas have been performed, the body of the saint is replaced in its silver shell, the worshipers leave the church, and the waters of the lake shortly resume their former level. *De adventu* concludes, "The Patriarch of the Indians having thus related in the Roman Curia, Pope Calixtus II, with the rest of the Roman church who were present, raising their hands to heaven, together glorified Christ, who continues to work such and so great miracles through his holy apostle Thomas year by year, and who lives, with the Father and Holy Ghost, for ever and ever."

Taken at face value, *De adventu* seems to be nothing more than a pious miracle tract, of no particular historical importance. The city of Hulna is unknown to geographers; the story of the miraculously replenished oil lamp was probably borrowed from St. Gregory of Tours's account of the pilgrim Theodore's journey to the shrine of St. Thomas in India; two other passages of the tale were surely taken from one of the sixth-century Latin translations of the *Acts of Thomas*—in which, referring to the transfer of the saint's body to Edessa, it is noted that the body "was placed into a silver casket that hung on silver chains," and that in the city of Edessa "no heretic, no Jew, no idolator can stay alive." Even the motives for Patriarch John's visit to Constantinople must be dismissed as implausible. If he really had been a Christian of St. Thomas from southern India, he would have gone for his pallium not to the Greek Orthodox patriarch in Byzantium, who would have regarded him as heretical, but to his own Nestorian catholicos in Baghdad, if any such journey had been at all necessary.

However, a contemporary document, the letter of Odo of Rheims to Count Thomas, forces us to take at least some of *De adventu* more seriously. Odo, who lived from 1118 to 1151, probably wrote the letter between 1126 and 1135. In it he tells of being present at the court of the Pope when a delegation of ambassadors from Byzantium arrived,
bringing with them a certain Archbishop of India, whom Odo does not name. Already the story deviates from De adventu, in which Patriarch John is said to have come to Rome with a group of returning papal legates, not with a Byzantine embassy. Odo’s explanation for the Indian prelate’s presence in Constantinople is also quite different. He declares that the ruler of the archbishop’s country had died, leaving no heir, and the archbishop had gone to Byzantium to obtain a new prince for his land from among the Byzantine emperor’s entourage. Twice the monarch had received the archbishop graciously and had nominated one of his courtiers to the Indian throne, but each time the designated candidate had perished en route to India. The emperor had declined to select a third; but instead of setting out immediately for his homeland, the archbishop had gained permission to visit Rome in the company of the Byzantine ambassadors.

Odo says he was present in Rome when the Indian archbishop had an audience with the Pope and told him about the shrine of St. Thomas. Odo’s version of the miracles of the shrine is similar to that of De adventu, but somewhat less flamboyant. Not a lake but a river blocks access to the mountain on which the shrine is located, and an annual drought permits pilgrims to cross its bed safely. The body of the apostle is preserved within, but Thomas does not distribute communion wafers to the faithful; rather, he receives gifts from them in his open hand, and, the archbishop maintained, he closes the hand when a heretic tries to place an offering in it. Odo relates that the Pope and his cardinals refused to believe these tales until the archbishop swore an oath that convinced them.

The differences between the story told in De adventu and that in the letter of Odo of Rheims rule out the possibility that one was derived from the other. The miraculous aspects of the tale probably stem from some common source, now lost, which combined legends of St. Thomas’ two shrines in India and Edessa into a single narrative. But what are we to make of the report of Patriarch John’s visit to Rome? There is no reason to doubt Odo’s statement that someone claiming to be a high ecclesiastic from India did pay a call on the Pope. Documentation exists for the alleged exchange of ambassadors between Byzantium and Rome; a letter written in May 1124 by the Byzantine Emperor John Comnenus to Pope Calixtus II apologizes for the tardiness of his reply to an earlier embassy the Pope had sent. But this does not necessarily mean that the episcopal visitor, if he did travel with one
of these embassies, was actually from India. *De adventu*'s notion that the Patriarch of the Indians would have gone to the Western world to seek a pallium from the Patriarch of Constantinople is, of course, nonsense. The motive Odo gives, that the Indian archbishop had come to ask the Byzantine emperor to nominate a prince for his land, seems nearly as implausible. Perhaps the stranger who visited Rome in 1122 was an impostor, as more than one medievalist has suggested; or perhaps the deficiencies of his interpreter caused him to be misunderstood, and he came from some place other than India.

One modern student of these matters, Vsevolod Slessarev, proposed in 1959 the view that the mysterious Eastern prelate came not from India but from Edessa, or some district near Edessa in northern Syria. Much that seems unlikely or incomprehensible is thereby explained. Edessa, in 1122, was ruled by a Crusader prince, Count Joscelyn I, who at least in theory was a vassal of the Byzantine emperor. “On September 13, 1122,” Slessarev points out, “Count Joscelyn and several of his companions were captured by the Turks. Would it not be possible that some Syrian or Armenian churchman from Edessa took this occasion to petition the Byzantine emperor to restore Greek rule over the city that only a generation before had been taken from the Greeks by a breach of agreement? This conjecture would conflict chronologically with May 5, 1122, as the time when the Patriarch visited Pope Calixtus II in Rome, but . . . this date is by no means reliable.” If the Pope's visitor did indeed come from Edessa, he would naturally have discussed with the Pope some of the miracles credited to the shrine of St. Thomas in that city, and out of that conversation the author of *De adventu* could easily have produced the highly embroidered fantasy that has come down to us.

The story of Patriarch John bears on the legend of Prester John in several ways. The name of the prelate, obviously, is one. In the 1120s, evidently, word was circulating in Europe that a high-ranking priest from India named John had paid a call on the Pope; it is not beyond imagination to think that this story may have got back to Syria in garbled form and provided the name of John for the supposed priest-king of the extreme Orient, to whom the actual military exploits of Yeh-lii Ta-shih were being credited. This, naturally, is a slender hypothesis. What is more noteworthy about the Patriarch John narrative is the fanciful imagery it employs in describing St. Thomas’ shrine in India—imagery which, as we shall soon see, recurs in the most famous of the
medieval accounts of the realm of Prester John. The river of gems, the annual resurrection of St. Thomas, the all-healing balsam and other miracles, all find their place in the Prester John stories, and in one version the “Patriarch of St. Thomas” rules as regent for Prester John whenever the great monarch goes out of his country to wage war.

There are other links, besides *De adventu*, joining the legend-cycles of St. Thomas and Prester John. On the authority of Bishop Hugh of Jabala, Otto of Freising reported that Prester John “is said to be a direct descendant of the Magi.” These were the wise men from the East who, the Gospel of Matthew relates, came to Jerusalem at the time of the Nativity, “saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him,” and, finding the infant Jesus, presented him with gold and frankincense and myrrh. By the third century apocryphal traditions had arisen to the effect that the Magi were kings, and were three in number; by the sixth, their names appeared in apocryphal literature as Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar. In at least two late apocryphal works, the *Book of Seth* and the eighth-century Syrian *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, it is told that after the resurrection of Christ St. Thomas traveled to the homeland of the Three Magi, baptized them, and accepted their aid in the conversion of their subjects. Some scholars have pointed out that in Armenian texts of the legend the name of Gaspar appears as “Gathaspar,” which they see as a variant of the Indian “Gudaphara”—who is the King Gundafor of the *Acts of Thomas*. By this process Prester John emerges as a descendant of one of the Indian kings whom St. Thomas converted to Christianity; and an account of Prester John’s kingdom written less than a generation after Bishop Hugh’s visit to Viterbo explicitly states that the palace of Prester John is patterned after the heavenly edifice that Thomas designed for Gundafor.

Vsevolod Slessarev has cautiously extended the theory that even the name of Prester John may have been drawn from the cycle of St. Thomas legends. He notes that in the *Acts of Thomas* the dying apostle is shown naming two young men as his spiritual successors in India: Sifur, his guide to King Mazdai’s land, whom he ordains as a priest, and Vizan, King Mazdai’s son, whom he makes a deacon. In several later versions of the story, however, it is Vizan who becomes the priest, Sifur the deacon; since Vizan was of royal birth, it is more probable that Thomas would have given him the higher ecclesiastical rank. Interestingly, “Vizan” is the Persian equivalent of “John,” and in some versions
of the story John and not Vizan is the name used for King Mazdai's son. Thus we see St. Thomas designating a certain John, who is both a priest and a future king, as one of the heads of the Christian Church in India. "An original Prester John belonging to the cycle of legends created around St. Thomas," Slessarev has written, "would solve many difficulties that so far have complicated the previous identifications. If it was he who inspired the image of the later Prester John, one could dispense entirely with the tenuous derivations of his name from the foreign titles; at the same time he would have had those vital ingredients which made the later Prester John a Christian king and priest."

There is one final place where we may seek the antecedents of Bishop Hugh's "Presbyter Ioannes," and that is in a work to which the good bishop certainly had access: the New Testament. For there we find the very name of John the Presbyter.

Five books of the New Testament are traditionally credited to John the son of Zebedee, one of the original twelve apostles, the first disciples of Jesus. These are the Gospel According to St. John; the Revelation of St. John the Divine; and the three short Epistles of John. The actual authorship of these five works has perplexed biblical scholars for centuries—indeed, almost since they were composed. The evidence that the Gospel of St. John was really written by the apostle is most uncertain, and, in any event, it appears that the text as we have it was substantially revised and extended by someone who was not its original author. There is considerable doubt that the author of the Gospel, whoever he may have been, was also responsible for writing the Book of Revelation. The three Epistles of John are possibly the work of the same man who produced the Gospel of St. John, but there is some cause to think that they were done by a later writer, who perhaps was one of St. John's followers. Some authorities believe that the First Epistle is by one hand and that the Second and Third are by another, although it has also been proposed that the First and Second have common authorship and the Third is separate, and that all three are the work of one individual.

It is in the Second and Third Epistles of John that the apostle, or the writer who speaks in his name, identifies himself as a "presbyter."
This was a title used from the earliest days of Christianity to designate an elder of the Church, one who has the responsibility for the management of the affairs of a local congregation, and who perhaps also does some teaching. Presbyters held a rank intermediate between bishops and deacons; that is, they were priests, and the word "priest" is derived from the Latin presbyter, itself derived from the Greek presbyteros, "an older man." The original form of the word survives today in the name of the Presbyterian Church, founded in the sixteenth century as a reformist movement whose aim was to restore Christianity to the ideals of the apostolic era.

In most English translations of the Bible, presbyteros is rendered as "elder." Hence, in the King James version, the Second Epistle of John begins, "The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth; and not I only, but also all they that have known the truth . . . ." and the Third Epistle opens, "The elder unto the well-beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth. . . ." But a twelfth-century reader would not have had access to a translation of the Bible into English or any other secular European tongue of the time. The only text in use in Roman Catholic lands then was St. Jerome's Latin translation, the Vulgate, in which the author of the Second and Third Epistles of John speaks of himself as a presbyter, and anyone who consulted the original Greek text of the epistles would find the term presbyteros employed.

The identity of this John the Presbyter was a topic of learned inquiry when the New Testament still was young. Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, devoted some lines to the matter in the classic History of the Church that he wrote early in the fourth century. Eusebius quotes a passage written about the year 130 by the theologian Papias of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, whose works are otherwise lost. Describing the way he learned the tenets of the faith in his obscure village, Papias said, "Whenever anyone came who had been a follower of the presbyters, I inquired into the words of the presbyters, what Andrew or Peter had said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other disciple of the Lord, and what Aristion and the presbyter John, disciples of the Lord, were still saying. For I did not imagine that things out of books would help me as much as the utterances of a living and abiding voice." On the evidence of this passage Eusebius concluded that there had been two Johns, since two are mentioned by Papias: one the apostle (who could also be called a presbyter), and another, a
younger man, "the presbyter John." The original apostles must all have been dead in Papias' time, but it would seem from Papias' phrase "were still saying" that Aristion and the presbyter John were alive in the early second century. Eusebius' interpretation has been challenged by some later commentators, who maintain that despite the curious double mention of John by Papias he nevertheless was referring to only one man, the apostle and presbyter; others, however, accept the presbyter as the author of the Epistles of John, though not the Gospel.

These matters aside, it is important here to consider the existence of a persistent apocryphal tradition that the Apostle John did not die but was chosen by Jesus to wander in the world as an immortal until the Second Coming of Christ. One source of this belief is the ninth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus, speaking with John and several of the other apostles, declares, "Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power." And in the final chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus seems to hint that he has conferred immortality upon John, and the Gospel notes, "Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die."

In fact, the Gospels of Mark and John both explicitly deny that John is to be granted life eternal. In the tenth chapter of Mark, Jesus tells John and his brother James, "Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of," meaning that they too shall be martyrs. Again, in the final chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus is shown taking pains to quash the rumor that John, described as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," would be spared from death. The scene is a conversation between Jesus and some of his disciples at the shore of the Sea of Galilee, after the Resurrection, in which Jesus asks Peter to follow him into death, and the full passage, in the modern translation of Father Raymond E. Brown, is this:

"Then Peter turned around and noticed that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following (the one who had leaned back against Jesus' chest during the supper and said, 'Lord, who is the one who will betray you?'). Seeing him, Peter was prompted to ask Jesus, 'But Lord, what about him?' 'Suppose I would like him to remain until I come,' Jesus replied, 'how does that concern you? Your concern is to follow me.' This is how the word got around among all the brothers that this disciple was not going to die. As a matter of fact, Jesus never told him that
he was not going to die; all he said was: 'Suppose I would like him to remain until I come [how does that concern you]?'

The implication is clear: Jesus has chosen Peter to be the next martyr but has not called upon John to die, and the subject of John's death is not Peter's business. But the entire passage has the earmarks of an editorial emendation, designed to explain to Christians of the late first or early second century how it has come to pass that the Apostle John has died, despite the widespread belief that he was not supposed to die. That is, it may have been the impression among the earliest members of the Church that Jesus had given John immortality with some such phrase as, "Remain until I come." But when the apostle did in fact die and the Second Coming was obviously not yet at hand, the closing section of the Gospel of John was amended to show that Jesus' phrase must not be interpreted literally. Despite this, the tradition of an undying John could not be eradicated.

At the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor the alleged tomb of the Apostle John was a sacred shrine as early as the second century; indeed, by the third there were two rival tombs of John at Ephesus, an embarrassment which Eusebius accounted for by suggesting that one was the apostle's tomb and one the tomb of that later John, John the Presbyter. No matter how many tombs of St. John were adduced, however, people went on believing that the apostle had been exempted from mortality and roamed the earth unrecognized, awaiting the return of the Saviour.

Now we have all the known material out of which the tale told by Bishop Hugh of Jabala could have been woven. There was St. John, who refers to himself twice in the Bible as John the Presbyter, who perhaps was still alive more than ten centuries after the Crucifixion. There were the Nestorian Christians of St. Thomas in India, who had been brought to their faith long ago by another of the twelve apostles. There was King Gundafor, said to have been one of the Three Magi, whom St. Thomas had baptized and for whom St. Thomas had built a wondrous celestial palace. There was Vizan/John, prince and priest, son of the ruler of a neighboring Indian kingdom. There was Patriarch John of India, who had come to Rome to speak of the miraculous shrine at Hulna where St. Thomas' incorruptible body was preserved. There was the ruler of the isle of Sarandib, whom Sindbad the Sailor saw to possess an emerald-tipped scepter. Lastly, there was the doughty
Yeh-lü Ta-shih, Gur-Khan of Kara-Khitai, who in 1141 had dealt the Moslem Seljuks of Persia so terrible a blow that it was worthy of a mighty champion of Christendom. Out of some or all of this the legend of Prester John was fashioned, possibly over a period of many centuries, gaining new levels of meaning with each retelling, until, by the time Bishop Hugh of Jabala paid his call on Pope Eugenius III in 1145, it had taken the form of a story of a distant Christian ruler, combining in himself the functions of priest and king, whose exploits on the field of battle were unparalleled, and who would, if only he had been able to find some way of crossing the Tigris, surely have come to the assistance of the troubled Crusaders in the Holy Land.