

The Significance of Prester John in Traditional Metaphysics

By Nigel Jackson

'John, Priest, by the almighty power of God and the might of our Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords... I, Presbyter Johannes, the Lord of Lords, surpass all under heaven in virtue, in riches and in power.'
(Letter of Prester John to the Emperor Manuel Comnenus, 1165)

'In front of him was the figure of the priest-king, the Graal lifted in his hands... "I am John" a voice sounded, "and I am the prophecy of the things that are to be and are. You who have sought the centre of the Graal, behold through me that which you seek, receive from me that which you are.'
(Charles Williams 'War in Heaven', 1930)

The medieval world of Christendom, insofar as it realised in its purest expressions an intact and regular paradigm of an integral traditional civilization in the West, still retained a normative sense of the proper relations subsisting between the sacerdotal and regal functions. Even as that paradigm became obscured and confused by encroaching decadence as we can see occurring by the 12th century, the lineaments of metaphysical truths and symbolisms were still clear enough to persist within certain spiritual-cultural forms, whether that be the initiatic domain of the Christian sacraments, chivalric orders, the corporate craft-associations and guild mysteries or the cycles of courtly Romance inspired by the 'Matter of Britain'.

One figure emerges within a mythical aureole of esoteric significance in the 12th century, the famous ruler of a fabled oriental Christian kingdom, a potentate who is simultaneously *rex et sacerdos*, the king-pontiff called Presbyter Iohannes or Prester John. He is descendant of the Magi-Kings who greeted the newborn Jesus, whose seat in Asia

is more than a temporal throne but rather an image, simultaneously fabulous, paradisiacal and suggestive of the initiatic Centre—or rather a secondary Centre established after the occultation of the Supreme Centre. Whether situated in India or as some later posited in Abyssinia, the domain of Prester John is founded on an archetypal pattern, the Grail-Kingdom, the Terrestrial Paradise, a concealed repository in the fastnesses and deserts of Asia where, according to romances such as ‘Titurel’, the Grail was carried eastward to be successively guarded by a line of Grail-Kings descended from Prester John who all held the name *Iohannes*, a hieronym indicating the interior dimension of the Christian eso-exoteric tradition. Wolfram Von Eschenbach (1195-1225), in his dazzling and intricate redaction of the Grail-cycle *Parzival*, makes Prester John the offspring of the union of Parzival’s half-brother, the ‘saracen’ knight Feirifiz and the Grail-bearer Repanse de Schoye:

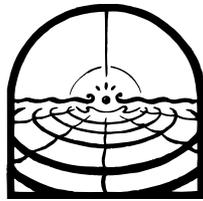
Only now could Repanse de Schoye be glad of her journey. Later in India she bore a son called “John”. They called him “Prester John”, and, ever since, they call their kings by no other name.¹

The *grasalis* is, as René Guénon has noted, interchangeably both book, *gradualis*, or inscribed vessel or stone, the veritable deposit of the initiatic science of the Primordial Tradition. This eastward peregrination of the Grail is paralleled later by the departure of the Brethren of the Rosy Cross from Europe after the 30 Years War. Heinrich Neuhaus, writing in 1618 in his anti-Rosicrucian tract ‘*Pia et Ultimissima Admonitio de Fratribus Rosae Crucis*’, had asserted that the Brothers of the Rosy Cross had departed Europe for India, a report repeated in the 18th century by Sigmund Richter. As with the idea of a mysterious Asiatic abode to which the Grail had been transferred, the implication is that the initiatic path to the Centre was thereafter largely inaccessible to the West.

The Grail was in some German accounts a chalice carven of pure emerald, the frontal jewel of the Angel of Light which he lost at the Fall during the ‘War in Heaven’ and which was thereafter warded by *Templeisen*, Templars of the Grail, as Wolfram Von Eschenbach tells us, atop the mystical mountain, the Wildenberg or Munsalvaesche, the Mountain of Salvation, another image of the sacred Centre conceived as the crown of the cosmic mountain at the axial world-centre, like

¹ *Parzival*, by Wolfram Von Eschenbach, trans. by A. T. Hatto, Middlesex 1980 pp.408.

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