



# Barry Lawrence Ruderman Antique Maps Inc.

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## Abissinorum Sive Pretiosi Ioannis Imperium

**Stock#:** 86094  
**Map Maker:** Cloppenburg  
**Date:** 1673  
**Place:** Amsterdam  
**Color:** Hand Colored  
**Condition:** VG  
**Size:** 10 x 7.5 inches  
**Price:** \$ 345.00



### Description:

#### *The Search for Prester John*

Striking map of eastern Africa, which is suggestively attributed to kingdom of the mythical Christian King Prester John.

Cloppenburg's map is based on a similar work that featured in Mercator's influential atlas and on an Ortelius map that debuted in his *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* in 1573. It shows the African continent from the Upper Nile region to Ethiopia and Congo to present-day Angola and Mozambique.

The map features towns, lakes, and rivers, as well as a wealth of islands in the western Indian Ocean. Much of the Arabian Peninsula is also included. There are a few narrative notes, such as the mention near the toponym *Anzicana* that local peoples practice anthropophagy.

The main lure of the map is the mention of the mysterious Prester John, but it also engages in another early cartographic debate about the interior of Africa: the Mountains of the Moon and the source of the Nile. Here, the mountains are simply called "*Zet Montes*," but they are placed between two large lakes in southern Africa. This closely follows the model of Ortelius' regional map of Prester John's kingdom.

#### Mountains of the Moon and the source of the Nile

Typically, mapmakers thought the Nile River rose from twin lakes south of the equator, which were near the Mountains of the Moon. Streams from the mountains fed the lakes. Ptolemy describes such a lakes-and



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-mountains layout in his works, although the precise identification of the Mountains of the Moon may have been a fourth century addition to his text.

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

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

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

In his [regional Prester John map](#), however, Ortelius has brought back the Mountains of the Moon. The Nile still branches from two lakes, but the larger of these is now called Zaire, as it had been with Gastaldi. Clearly Ortelius continued to review sources between drafting the Africa map and the regional map. Mercator and later mapmakers followed mainly in the two-lake model, including iterations of the Mountains of the Moon for centuries.

### **Prester John**

One of the most important geographic enigmas of the Medieval and early modern periods was the kingdom of Prester John. The legend of a Christian Kingdom lost among Muslim lands was popular from the twelfth century and continued long into the seventeenth. Prester John was supposedly descended from one of the three magi. Over time, the utopian kingdom of Prester John came to house a bevy of other fantastical objects, including the Fountain of Youth.

The idea of a Christian King, a Presbyter John, of immense wealth had been circulating since the mid-twelfth century, part of the rumors that swirled around the Crusades. The story received a boost from a mysterious letter sent to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I. The letter, supposedly written by John,



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describes his power, faith, and lands. The letter circulated ca. 1165 and survives in nearly 100 medieval manuscript copies. Initially, Europeans thought Prester John's kingdom was in India, and later in Central Asia. Finally, in the early modern period, the search shifted to Africa, specifically in Christian Ethiopia.

The story and the desire to find the kingdom was ubiquitous across Europe for centuries, losing steam only in the seventeenth century when antiquarians found that the Prester John story had no convincing ties to Ethiopia. Its popularity testifies to the anxieties within the Christian faith during an epoch when Christianity was fighting for survival in the Middle East, and when Christian Europe was often in conflict with Muslims in the Ottoman Empire and was encountering Indigenous peoples, and their religious systems, around the world.

**Detailed Condition:**

Minor toning.