Yeh-Lü Ta-Shih Encyclopedia Article

Yeh-Lü Ta-Shih

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Yeh-Lü Ta-Shih

1098-1135

Khitan (northern Asian) king whose defeat of a Seljuk Turk leader in Persia probably served as the basis for the Prester John legend. A "barbarian" nation to the north of China, the Khitan had established a dynasty called the Liao, but in 1125 they were driven out by the rival Jurchen people. Yeh-lü Ta-shih, a member of the ruling house, escaped with some 200 subjects to central Asia, where with the support of numerous Turkish tribes, he founded the Kara-Khitai empire. His forces defeated those of Sanjar, Turkish ruler of Persia, in battle in 1141, and as tales of the conflict moved westward, the story changed dramatically. Eventually Yeh-lü Ta-shih was transformed into Prester John, a Christian ruler eager to aid the crusaders in Palestine. In 1145 Bishop Hugh of Jabala—who presumably knew nothing of Yeh-lü Ta-shih—reported this story to the historian Otto of Freising (c. 1111-1158), and in the years that followed, Europeans engaged in a quest to find Prester John and his kingdom. As for the Kara-Khitai, they were overthrown in 1211 by Mongol invaders.