The Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire rarely conquered its neighbors by force of arms. Rather, it was a cultural conqueror, exporting its particular brand of Christianity, and using that bond of shared orthodoxy as leverage to secure its own long-term power and stability. This model of religious diplomacy can be seen at work in varying degrees of success in Byzantine relations with Bulgaria in the ninth, Russia in the tenth, and Serbia in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The process was one through which the Byzantine Emperor would come to claim authority over all Christians, even those beyond his borders. In its own way, this Christian universalism in Byzantine diplomacy mirrors earlier claims that the Roman Emperor stood sovereign over the entire world. Clearly, this form of Byzantine religious diplomacy did not spring forth fully formed overnight. Christianization as a vehicle for cultural and political influence dates back to the earliest moments of Byzantine history, when the Roman Empire in its former entirety still straddled the whole of the Mediterranean basin.

The history of Roman imperial relations with Ethiopia is one of the earliest examples of Byzantine religious diplomacy at work. Over the course of some three hundred years prior to the Islamic conquest of North Africa, the Roman imperial court developed a political and cultural relationship with Ethiopia that would come to typify later Byzantine foreign interaction. A full comparative history of Byzantine Christianizing foreign policy is beyond the scope of this paper. However, because late antique Ethiopia is so obscure, the topic seems well worth a brief survey. The relationship between Rome and Ethiopia is an excellent example of how the Roman Empire interacted with another Christian power, and study of it will hopefully provoke deeper thought on the nature of Byzantine diplomacy in general. By way of conclusion, it is possible to argue that during the historical process of diplomatic relations with Ethiopia, the late Roman state came to realize that religious ties reached farther and bound more tightly than force of military arms, and that the Roman state employed this realization in a deliberate and long-lived attempt to exert its influence into areas once thought forever out of its reach.

The story of a Christianized Roman imperial court begins with Constantine, in the first half of the fourth century CE. It is in this period too that late antique Ethiopia comes more clearly into focus. The kingdom centered at Axum, just south of the border of modern Eritrea, underwent an important stage of cultural development, making the gradual transition

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* Many thanks to Professors Bonds, Hoffman, and Kidner for comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks also to Mr. Michael Smith for first introducing me to the topic of late antique Ethiopia.

to Christianity at much the same time as Rome. In fact, a good deal of our information about Ethiopia during the rule of the House of Constantine comes from Roman ecclesiastical historians writing in the fourth and fifth centuries.  

First among these historians is Eusebius of Caesarea. From his Life of Constantine, it becomes clear that relations between Ethiopia and Rome were, by the time of Constantine, already a work in progress. Eusebius records the murky details of a conflict between Ethiopia and Rome, the full nature of which seems to be beyond our grasp. Although the origins of the conflict are unclear, Constantine is recorded as conquering the Ethiopians and the Blemmyes, pushing his gains to "the very confines of the South."  

No doubt the praise is exaggerated. Whatever border skirmish or brief foray took place, the conflict did little to expand Rome's direct political control into the Horn of Africa. The Blemmyes were northern Nubian tribes on the outskirts of Roman territory, not particularly near Ethiopia. Either Eusebius himself was confused or, as we will argue below, the Ethiopians had found themselves considerably far afield.

Whatever the exact nature of the Roman victory, it was a clear gain in prestige for the Roman Empire, and may have been a turning point in Roman relations with Axumite Ethiopia. A number of foreign and exotic embassies are recorded as arriving at the imperial court to pay their respects to the premier power in the Mediterranean. Among these came Ethiopian representatives, their gifts of gold and jewels adding to Constantine's growing collection of diplomatic honors.

It is easy to guess what might have come out of such diplomatic visits. Shortly thereafter, the sources speak of an undated treaty between Rome and various tribal groups in the Ethiopian region. Whether this was a treaty imposed by a victorious Constantine, or perhaps restored by him after a previous violation, is hard to tell. At least some portion of the treaty seems to have guaranteed safe passage to Roman naval merchants sailing through the area, and putting into Ethiopian ports. Our sources are vague on this point, but it seems safe to assume that the Ethiopians in question were none other than the Axumite kings. The port in question would have been Adulis, on the Red Sea coast; the need for some sort of treaty had perhaps come to Roman imperial attention due to Roman trading interests in the area. Certainly, travelers sailing south from Egypt, eager to explore the Ethiopian interior, did not do so simply out of curiosity.

Perhaps the Ethiopians grew resentful of the constant Roman trading presence in the first few decades of the fourth century. It has been suggested that the treaty simply fell into abeyance at the death of the rulers who had signed it, and as yet awaited renewed

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3 Eusebius, The Life of Constantine VII.

4 This should not overly trouble us. The time is just right in terms of the growth of the Axumite power to expect to find Ethiopian troops somewhat far afield. The Ethiopian king Ezana is noted for his campaign to the Nile around the 330s. It will be argued below, pages 74f, that Eusebius was essentially correct, and that Axum was in the process of becoming a state right on Rome's borders.

5 Eusebius, Constantine IV.7.

6 Rufinus, Ecclesiastical History I.9.
recognition. In either case, the outcome is clear. The ill-fated vessel of a Tyrian Christian philosopher named Meropius bore the brunt of the Axumite power’s defiance of imperial Rome. Pulling into port for lack of fresh water at some point in the 320s, the passengers and crew were captured and killed. Meropius included, the angry Ethiopians sparing only his two young relatives, Frumentius and Edesius. The act of mercy was one of providence as well, for even today, Frumentius is regarded as one of the pivotal figures in the history of Ethiopia.

The story of the remarkable career the two boys enjoyed at the Ethiopian court would probably be dismissed as myth if it had not come first-hand from Edesius himself. Ella Amida, king of the Ethiopian ruling house, seems to have taken quite a liking to the two young boys. Poor Edesius had the dubious honor of becoming the royal cup bearer. Frumentius, however, must have so impressed his hosts with his financial acumen that he was eventually given complete control over the royal treasury. When Ella Amida passed away in 325, leaving behind Ezana, a son yet too young to rule, the young Roman’s role at court became even more prominent.

Never forgetful of his Roman roots, and the faith of his family, Frumentius was amazed to find Christians already present in Ethiopia. Under his encouragement, a small community came to flourish, as he gathered them together and prayed with them in “the Roman usage.” All of this must have made quite an impression on young king Ezana. No literary evidence tells us exactly when members of the Ethiopian royal house began to convert to Christianity, but the evidence from coinage is clear. Ezana’s earlier issues are indistinguishable from those of his predecessors. By the end of his reign, and perhaps as early as the 340s, the reverses of all bronze coins issued in his name were stamped with a large and conspicuous Christian cross.

Further numismatic evidence indicates the gradual creation of ties between the Roman and Ethiopian imperial courts. The story of Constantine’s vision of the Holy Cross, in which he was told, “In hoc signo vinces,” (“By this sign you will conquer”) is well known. There is every reason to believe that the motto formed part of the official Christian propaganda that came from the imperial court. At any rate, the story certainly made an impression at the Axumite court, and very quickly at that. One of Ezana’s immediate successors in the second half of the fourth century, a man whose name, MHDYS, is known only in its unvocalized version, issued a bronze piece bearing that very Constantinian motto. Was this a deliberate attempt to bask in the glow of Ethiopia’s more glorious northern neighbor? Or was it even a gesture that acknowledged Rome’s guidance on

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7 Munro 57.
8 Rufinus, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.9.
10 Sozomen II.24, paraphrasing Rufinus.
12 The source of the anecdote is no less official than Eusebius, in *The Life of Constantine* 1.28.
13 Munro 192. Perhaps the coins, whose exact dates are unknown, are imitations of the “*Hoc Signo Victor Eris*” issues of the Roman emperors Constans II (337-350), Vetranius (350), and Constantius Gallus (351-354).
religious affairs? In either case, it is clear that the seeds planted by Edesius and Frumentius had born significant fruit.

At last, the royal family let the two young men return home. Edesius, grateful to escape the duties of royal cup bearing, went off to Tyre to lead a quiet life as a priest. Frumentius would enjoy no such easy retirement. Presenting himself before Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, he explained the state of the Christian faith in Ethiopia, and suggested that a bishop be ordained to minister to the needs of the Axumite community. Immediately agreeable, Athanasius ordained Frumentius himself, and sent him promptly back to Axum. There, it is said, he "discharged the priestly functions so admirably that he became an object of universal admiration, and was revered no less than an apostle."14

Of course, late Roman ecclesiastical affairs were intimately intertwined with imperial policy. Where a powerful and controversial bishop like Athanasius can be found, the Roman emperors themselves are rarely far behind. In our case, we need look no further than the *Codex Theodosianus*, an important fifth century compilation of Roman law, to find a surprising development. An edict issued in Milan in 357 in the name of Constantius and Constans, two of Constantine's sons, reads as follows:

No person who has been instructed to go to the tribe of the Axumites or the Homerites shall henceforth tarry at Alexandria beyond the space of the time limit of one year, and after a year he shall not receive subsistence allowances.15

Despite its brevity, this law is an interesting glimpse at Roman diplomacy. The support of the imperial treasury notwithstanding, Roman imperial diplomats were delaying in Athanasian ecclesiastical territory. Constantius Augustus, among others, felt that such journeys to Axum were important enough to push the issue.

Why had Constantius taken this interest in Ethiopia? Axum seems awfully far away for Constantius to have expected any immediate political returns to emerge from his interest.16 Did he imagine that Ethiopia would come to constitute a rival Christian state, a possibility he aimed to forestall? Or was he simply concerned for the state of the Ethiopian church, acting already as the emperor of all Christians, even those beyond the Roman borders? The answer lies in Frumentius, and in his ecclesiastical superior, Athanasius. Athanasius was strictly orthodox, which in this context means that he was one of the foremost opponents of the Arian Christian heresy, then at its peak of power. As luck would have it, Constantius himself was an Arian, and worried about Athanasius' power and influence.

An historian of the late fourth century notes that Constantius had begun to interfere with Athanasius' role in ecclesiastical affairs because the latter was "persistently rumoured to have thoughts above his station and to be prying into matters outside of his province."17 It is hard to imagine that Athanasius entertained any threatening political ambitions. Nevertheless, his tendency to meddle in matters even outside of the empire might have left

14 Sozomen II.24.
15 CTh 12.12.2, Pharr translation.
16 Although, see below, pp. 14-16.
17 Ammianus Marcellinus 15.7, translation by Walter Hamilton.
Constantius feeling that the imperial prerogatives of diplomacy and prestige had been usurped. Further mindful that Frumentius, as an Athanasian appointee, was himself strictly orthodox, Constantius found himself facing the possibility that the Ethiopian church would become a force openly opposed to his imperial power and faith.

An embassy sent under a man named Theophilus in c. 356 delivered gifts and diplomatic missives to Axum and nearby south Arabian kingdoms. Prior to his departure, Constantius had drafted a letter to Ezana and his brother, warning the Ethiopian royalty about what he considered to be Frumentius' blasphemous tendencies. There can be no doubt that this first attempt at religious diplomacy was an utter failure. Constantius could not have been noted for his subtlety: "we command," he wrote to Ethiopia after rearranging ecclesiastical affairs in Alexandria, "that the same doctrine be professed in your churches as in theirs." One wonders how the Axumite kings reacted to this command. The Roman Emperor went on to request that Frumentius be sent back from Ethiopia for redoctrination. Constantius went on to remind the Ethiopian monarchs of the ordination of Frumentius at the hands of Athanasius, a man who, "unless you alone pretend to be ignorant of that which all men are well aware... is guilty of ten thousand crimes."

Such condescension was the height of diplomacy during the time of the House of Constantine. We might gather that the Ethiopian kings found the whole thing rather baffling. In fact, their own copy of the imperial letter ended up in the hands of Athanasius himself, perhaps sent to him in request for clarification. No doubt the Ethiopian royalty were quite content with their faith the way it had been taught to them, and did not need Roman imperial interference. Nevertheless, we can readily imagine what might be accomplished should the two courts be in agreement on religious matters, and should the Roman emperor be somewhat less difficult. The fruits of such a relationship are still a century and a half away.

In the meantime, traffic between the two countries was much more than a one-way affair. There is evidence that Ethiopian periphery regions came in time to turn directly to Rome for religious guidance, rather than looking to their immediate superiors at Axum. This is particularly true during the period following the reign of Ezana, on into the early fifth century, when a number of kings seem to have divided the sovereignty. Our few glimpses of Ethiopia in this period come from an unlikely source, the Chronicle of one John of Nikiu. The chronicle survives only in a later Ge'ez, or Ethiopic, copy. Although John of Nikiu is considered somewhat unreliable, he preserves a number of anecdotes otherwise lost to the late Roman historiographical tradition that might be worth relaying here.

Foremost among these is the story of an Ethiopian embassy to Honorius Augustus. A woman by the name of Theognosta, credited with missionary work in Yemen, seems to

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18 For the text of the letter, see Athanasius, *Apologia ad Constantium*. The identification of Theophilus with the delivery of this particular letter is somewhat speculative, but seems safe enough; see Kobishchanov 71-72.
19 I had originally argued that the presence of the letter in the writings of Athanasius indicated a carelessness with or amusement at the letter on the part of the Ethiopian kings. It has since been suggested to me by Professor Bonds that the Axumite kings might have sent the letter to the bishop in hopes of getting some clarification of the difficult theological and political situation.
20 Hanberry 85-86 for the curious aspects of this division.
21 See translation by R.H. Charles, 1916. One would like a better idea of where John might have gotten the peculiar story about Ethiopian emissaries to Honorius.
have brought Christianity to one of the lesser Ethiopian kings. Apparently, the work of Frumentius at the court of Ezana had not yet made itself felt throughout the span of the Axumite empire. In an interesting move, this unnamed lesser king bypassed the episcopal successors of Frumentius and sent directly to the Roman Emperor in the west to request that he appoint a bishop to rule their church.22 According to John of Nikiu, the emperor Honorius "rejoiced with great joy" at the news from Ethiopia, and was only too happy to approve the request.

Why Honorius should have been singled out for such an embassy is unclear. His relatives ruling at Constantinople would have been much closer, and theologically much more in line with the developing eastern orthodoxy that had fostered the nascent Ethiopian church. Perhaps the central Axumite church had already deteriorated to the poor state that seems to be indicated for the end of the century. More likely, we have before us the evidence of an otherwise lost political power play, the lesser kings of Ethiopia looking to the western half of the empire in hopes of freeing themselves from their Byzantine masters. The choice of a western emperor, and the request for a western bishop, suggests that some Ethiopians had begun to seek an alternative to the ecclesiastical structure at Axum.23

Certainly, this one incident is little more than a curious anomaly, for the future of Ethiopian relations with the Roman Empire lies with the Byzantine east. In the meantime, throughout the trying times of the fifth century, the Romans were much too preoccupied to look often to their African interests. Barbarians ravaged both halves of the empire, and with the western half giving way once and for all, there is little indication that either imperial court kept much contact with Ethiopia until the reign of Anastasius, beginning in the 490s.24

The only hint of interaction until that point is in the middle of the fifth century, during the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon in 451. That council, one of several in late antiquity summoned to define what constituted orthodox Christianity, adjudicated against the so-called monophysite formulation of the faith. Monophysite Christianity, which professed the one, indivisible, and strictly divine nature of Christ, had come to dominate in Alexandria, and as a consequence, throughout Ethiopia. When, in the aftermath of Chalcedon, monophysite Christians found themselves persecuted on Roman territory, a number of them fled to Ethiopia, including nine famous saints still revered in Ethiopian hagiography.25 The Axumite kingdom had rather abruptly found itself subscribing to a religion condemned as heresy by its powerful northern neighbor. We can imagine that such a dilemma had some impact on diplomatic relations between the two powers, but no

22 Hanberry 89-90 takes the view that the king in question was in fact the king of the central Axumite dynasty, whose family already needed to be reconverted. However, John of Nikiu's explicit contrast between "India" and "great India" implies a local sub-kingdom of some kind.

23 This is conjecture. Had the central powers at Axum already lapsed from Christianity, the embassy to Honorius would take on an entirely different meaning. However, there is no positive evidence for a non-Christian king at Axum until the 490s, seventy years after the death of Honorius.

24 The argument from silence is problematic, however, especially when one considers that sources on the fifth century are silent about nearly everything. The poems of Claudian (see note 52, below) hint at contact in the last quarter of the fourth century. Should an Ethiopian embassy attributed to the reign of the third century Aurelian in the Historia Augusta be taken as evidence from the late fourth century as well, given the date of the Historia's composition?

25 Munro 207 and following.
evidence of the problem has survived.

However, by the end of the fifth century, we are faced with the possibility that the Ethiopian ruling family had turned from Christianity. Although there is no numismatic evidence to suggest a general Ethiopian apostasy from Christianity, certain literary evidence claims that Tezana, a king at the dawn of the sixth century, had been raised a pagan.\(^26\) Is this evidence of a setback in Roman-Ethiopian relations after a long period of diplomatic neglect? We would need to know whether this change had stemmed from revolution or gradual cultural drift. Another possibility exists, that the late Roman chronicler who records these events has led us astray. From the accounts of John Malalas, it is clear that Andas, presumably Axumite king just prior to Tezana, still held the Roman Empire and its religion in high regard, despite his paganism and the long period of diplomatic silence. At the personal request of the Roman Emperor,\(^27\) Andas undertook an invasion of Jewish Yemen in retribution for the violent massacre of Roman merchants at work in that area.\(^28\) Aware of the religious significance of the conflict, Andas swore to embrace Christianity should he return victorious.

According to Malalas, he was true to his word, and his successors would never again stray from the Roman religion. There are some potential problems with the historicity of this account. Malalas is notorious for concocting stories off the top of his head. More likely, the story might be a doublet of events during the reign of Caleb, discussed below.\(^29\) However, at the very least, this chronicle provides us with a valuable glimpse at late Roman public perception of their government’s interactions with other powers. Malalas, and logically his late Roman peers, found it quite natural that the eastern Roman emperor should exert himself not through the force of arms but through the reputation of his religion.

We are on more solid ground with subsequent Ethiopian kings, who looked closely to Byzantium for advice on foreign policy. Ela Atzbeha, who is also known as Ellesbaas and Caleb, reigned for several decades in the early 500s, after the death of his father Tezana, and was perhaps the most important of sixth-century Ethiopian rulers. In a move apparently at the direct written request of Justin, the emperor at Constantinople from 518 to 527,\(^30\) he launched another Ethiopian invasion of the Arabian peninsula. Significantly, the lines of communication through which this plan came to fruition included a man named Timothy, patriarch of Alexandria, who sent and received embassies on the subject to and from both imperial powers.\(^31\) The invasion was again in nominal retribution for the slaughter of


\(^{27}\) This is only a conjecture. See Bury, *ibid*.

\(^{28}\) Malalas 18.433, 429, as usual, getting the dates wrong. For the story in general, see Bury 322f. See also the derivative Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, translation by Witold Witakowski, 54-56, who names the king Andug.

\(^{29}\) Andas/Andug does not match any of the names we know from standard Axumite king-lists. If the story is not a doublet, Andas might be the brother of Tezana, and responsible for his conversion. (Munro 205) For now, we should side with the authority of Bury, who retains the story’s distinction by assuming Andas to be the same as Ela Amida, a predecessor to Caleb/Atzbeh.

\(^{30}\) See the Greek *Mart. Arethae* and the letter from Justin included, which Bury v.2, 324 thinks a forgery.

\(^{31}\) Kobishchnov 99, citing contemporaneous martyrological accounts, presumably those such as found in Ps.-Dionysius 57-67, in which a letter triggered in part by the Yemenite massacres directs the ‘chief priest
Christian civilians. More likely that not, such a claim disguised equally important commercial and political interests of Ethiopia's Roman allies, interests that will become clear as the sixth century progresses. Ela Atzbeha took steps to cement the Ethiopian interventionist policy in Arabia, even setting up a puppet king to rule in his name. Sources for this period are slim, and it is not until we get to the reign of Justin's successor, Justinian, that historians such as Procopius bring more light to relations between Axum and Constantinople. Justinian, forever locked in combat with his Persian neighbors, began to consider the strength of the growing Christian powers to the south. An ambassador by the name of Julian was sent to the court of Ela Atzbeha and to that of the Homerite puppet king. It is said that Ela Atzbeha kissed the royal seal on Justinian's rescript, indeed a far cry from the treatment the letter of Constantius had received some two centuries before. Contained within the imperial missive was a two-fold proposal, a request from Justinian to his Ethiopian ally both military and economic in nature. He reasoned that by encouraging the Axumite kingdom to break into the Indian silk trade, Byzantine traders could work directly with their fellow Christians, and thus bypass the economic strangle-hold that their Persian rivals had put on the trade. In the meantime, the Ethiopian tributary in Arabia was to march across the desert to the north and invade the Persian Empire, hopefully distracting the Persians enough for Justinian to deliver the killing blow.

The plan failed. Interestingly, the circumstances surrounding this failure would blend almost indistinguishably into a series of events that would put a permanent end to the diplomatic relationship between Ethiopia and Byzantium. Persian merchants, closer to the heart of the Indian markets, had an advantage in the silk trade that the Ethiopians were never able to overcome. Their Arabian allies, meanwhile, had problems of their own. The Ethiopian puppet king had been overthrown, and replaced, curiously, with a former Roman slave.

The new king Abraham was a Christian, and willing enough to try to help Justinian where his former Ethiopian overlords had failed. According to Procopius, he "promised the Emperor Justinian many times to invade the land of Persia, but only once began the journey and then straightway turned back." This contemporary narrative is deceptively simple. We know from another source that Abraham had his hands full on the Arabian peninsula, and

of Alexandria... [to] write to the king of the Ethiopians” asking him for assistance.

32 Munro 86.
33 See Procopius, History of the Wars LXX.1.
34 Munro 154. It is also said of Ela Atzbeha that upon his eventual abdication, he sent his crown to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. See Munro 88-89, which unfortunately provides no exact citation. This story bears a marked resemblance to that in the Ethiopian national epic, the Kebra Negast, translation by Miguel F. Brooks, ch. 104. Therein, Caleb meets Justin in Jerusalem and the two agree to share the titles of Roman and Ethiopian emperor. These stories have eschatological significance, deliberately mirroring the symbolism of Psalm 68:31, “Ethiopia will hand over the hand [dominion] to God.” See Paul J. Alexander, The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) for a general discussion of the eschatological significance of Ethiopia in the sixth and seventh centuries.
35 Munro 154.
36 Procopius I.XX.12.
37 Procopius I.XX.3.
38 Procopius I.XX.13.
perhaps, on that one occasion, took the wrong route to Persia. His march north to Mecca was a disaster. The Meccans themselves never deployed an army, but witnessed instead an apparent miracle in which the enemy was driven back by "flocks of birds which pelted them with clay-stones."\textsuperscript{39}

The truth of the anecdote is less important than the significance of the moment in time, for Muhammad was born in Mecca that very year.\textsuperscript{40} Some six decades later, the Byzantine Emperor would receive a letter from Muhammad inviting him to embrace Islam, and the need, and, indeed, the physical practicality of continued relations between Byzantium and Ethiopia vanished forever. The Muslim conquests would cut right through the Egyptian pipeline that connected the two Christian empires. Ethiopia, the oldest independent Christian state after the eastern Roman Empire, would be lost to European contact for centuries to come.

In the meantime, however, this Christianized "New Rome" had, through its Ethiopian diplomatic contact, developed a unique method of ensuring its long-term political stability. For two and a half centuries, Roman Emperors had directed or influenced Ethiopian affairs in the name of a shared religious faith. Thus began to emerge the Byzantine imperial prerogative of assuming imperium over all Christians, even those beyond Roman imperial borders. What is so far missing from this brief narrative account is an explanation of the factors that made it possible. Even the strong bonds of faith are not forged and maintained without the avenues of communication that make such a process a realizable and convenient possibility. At first take, Axum seems quite far from either Rome or Constantinopole, and it seems hard to know why the Roman emperors would have bothered.

In point of fact, late antique Ethiopia should be seen as a growing power whose influence had come to stretch right up to Roman borders. Roman Egypt had once extended much farther south than its boundaries under Constantine. Diocletian, his famous predecessor, had divested Rome of some border cities he found himself unable to hold against the onrush of the Blemmyes.\textsuperscript{41} Interestingly, the Blemmyes are the same barbarians that were said to have been marching with the Ethiopians against Constantine at the beginning of our narrative. Although we have noted that Eusebius might have been exaggerating, we must also point out that the reign of Constantine is the same period in which Ezana took the field to conquer the Blemmyes. The Ethiopian monarch earned a convincing victory, and thus theoretically extended his nominal suzerainty all the way to the borders of Roman Egypt.\textsuperscript{42} On an inscription from what must be roughly the same period, an anonymous Axumite king boasts that he "made a footpath giving access by land into Egypt from that part of [his] dominions."\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{39} Koran 105.3, Dawood translation.
\textsuperscript{40} Without commenting on the accuracy of the Islamic tradition about the coincidence of dates, it is sufficient to note that the timeline seems a bit strained. This does not alter the general thrust of the point.
\textsuperscript{41} R. C. Blockley, The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire (Liverpool: F. Cairns, 1983) 2:219 note 71.
\textsuperscript{42} See the text of an inscription recording the event in Munro 224. Claims of empire over the Blemmyes remain a part of Axumite official titulature for over two hundred years: Munro 159.
If this interpretation is correct, a mere two generations brought such change that an Ethiopian monarch could claim suzerainty, no matter how distant, over cities that had once been within Roman territory. Ethiopian claims over the Blemmyes would last for several centuries to come.\textsuperscript{44} Later kings such as Ela Atsbeha would also claim control over the land of the Noba, another power between Axum and Roman Egypt.\textsuperscript{45} It soon became clear to Rome that its southern interests would only be safe through obtaining closer relations with Ethiopia. In fact, it has been noted that the Blemmyes only attacked Roman territory when freed from Ethiopian subjection, or when given explicit permission to do so from Axum itself.\textsuperscript{46} Although Rome would never have any reason to worry about a direct military threat from Axum, it did have certain interests that led it to pay increasing attention to the sudden growth of this Ethiopian power.

The main impact that Axumite expansion had on Rome was in the realm of trade. An overland journey from the outskirts of Roman territory to Axum itself was roughly thirty days, a short period in antique travel terms.\textsuperscript{47} At the dawn of the fifth century, Olympiodorus of Thebes made a portion of the journey himself, simply “for the purposes of research”, and reported that the Blemmyes had control of an apparently extensive emerald mining operation.\textsuperscript{48} Axumite influence over that business might already have been reality, as it certainly became during the following century.\textsuperscript{49} Axum certainly paid attention to crucial trade routes along its coastline. We have already pointed out the importance of Adulis as a destination for Roman traders. Ivory, incense, and gold all ended up within Roman territory via the merchants at Adulis.\textsuperscript{50} As the Axumite power grew and came to exert a more strict military control over access to the Red Sea, perhaps vital economic interests forced Rome to assure peaceful relations with its southern neighbor.

Finally, successive Roman emperors would have found Ethiopian diplomacy to be worthy of attention simply for reasons of prestige. The very fact of receiving embassies from Ethiopia, such as those clearly attested under Constantine and quite possibly under Honorius, would be a matter of public acclaim for each emperor in question.\textsuperscript{51} A successful court propagandist could transform the arrival of a routine diplomatic gift into the delivery of tribute by a vanquished enemy.\textsuperscript{52} This sort of international prestige obtained through standard diplomatic means is an element common to Roman relations with all of its lesser

\textsuperscript{44} See note 42. The point that this titular claim must have by logical implication included former Roman territory is one that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been made before.

\textsuperscript{45} Munro 159.

\textsuperscript{46} Kobishchanov 41 for a summary on recent opinions on this matter.

\textsuperscript{47} Cosmas Topography II.138.

\textsuperscript{48} Olympiodorus in Photius, Bibl. Cod. 80, in Blockley 2:199.

\textsuperscript{49} Cosmas Topography XI.339; in McCrindle, 371. See also Kobishchanov 78.

\textsuperscript{50} Munro 35, 170.

\textsuperscript{51} To give an external example in support of this point, we need look only as far as Rome’s first emperor, Augustus. In his Res Gestae, in which he records his life’s many accomplishments, he is meticulous in his record of embassies from all sorts of far-flung powers seeking the friendship of Rome, including the distant land of India: Res Gestae 31-33.

\textsuperscript{52} The best example of just such a propagandist is the court poet during the reign of Honorius. In Claudian’s De Quarto Consulatu Honorii Augusti, line 35, Honorius’ grandfather is described as having “overran the deserts of Ethiopia” (Loeb translation). We might suggest that something a little less dramatic, if anything at all, in fact took place.
neighbors. What makes late Roman relations with Ethiopia so different is the realization at the two courts that they shared a common and universal faith. This realization was at the heart of a new Byzantine diplomatic approach structured around the vocabulary of Christian orthodoxy.

This diplomatic approach would have a long history, surviving for over half a millennium of Byzantine ascendancy in international affairs. The question left unanswered by this brief survey is one of means and ends. Did the universal aspirations of Christianity create a diplomatic brotherhood among believing royalty that allowed for the extension of Roman power and prestige? Or were the once believable claims of the Roman Emperor to universal dominion simply adapted to the language of a universal religion to propagate the message of Roman influence and might? To put the matter more simply, we have argued that contact between Byzantium and Ethiopia first involved issues of trade. Was the Christian diplomatic rhetoric that came to dominate this contact the true explanation for several centuries of diplomacy, or was it simply a vehicle through which to further Roman dominion? We await a more thorough understanding of late Roman and Ethiopian antiquity to answer these questions about Byzantine religious diplomacy.

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