

## **A DIPLOMACY OF BEASTS: AFRICA SOUTH OF THE SAHARA, THE EMPIRE OF AKSUM, AND THE PATHS TOWARDS A MULTIPOLAR LATE ANTIQUITY**

Otávio Luiz Vieira Pinto<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The aim of this essay is to argue in favour of a “Multipolar Late Antiquity” based on the postulates of Global History and World-Systems. For this purpose, a specific case study was selected – the 496 CE embassy, probably coming from Axum to Constantinople accompanied by two giraffes and an elephant – as a path of investigation. Based on this case, it is claimed that diplomacy can be understood as an element of structural cohesion for a late-antique World-System, and that diplomatic language allows us to think about politics of multipolar recognition. In this sense, it is necessary to include Africa (especially in its portions South of the Sahara) in this broad scenario, and one way to do so stems from the understanding that specific animals, such as giraffes and elephants, operate symbolic forms of diplomatic language and, therefore, allow us to glimpse African protagonisms in a more global scope.

### **Keywords**

Late Antiquity; Africa; diplomacy; Aksum.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor – Federal University of Paraná, Curitiba, Brazil. E-mail: [rocha.pombo@hotmail.com](mailto:rocha.pombo@hotmail.com).

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## **Resumo**

Este ensaio tem por objetivo pensar uma “Antiguidade Tardia Multipolar” a partir de postulados da História Global e dos Sistema-Mundo. Para tanto, selecionou-se um estudo de caso específico – a embaixada de 496 EC vinda provavelmente de Axum até Constantinopla acompanhada de duas girafas e um elefante – como caminho de investigação. A partir dele, argumenta-se que a diplomacia pode ser entendida um elemento de coesão estruturante para um Sistema-Mundo tardo-antigo, e que a linguagem diplomática nos permite pensar políticas de reconhecimento multipolar. Neste sentido, é preciso incluir a África (especialmente em suas porções ao sul do Saara) neste cenário amplo, e uma forma de fazê-lo é a partir da compreensão de que animais específicos, como girafas e elefantes, operam formas simbólicas de linguagem diplomática e, portanto, nos permitem vislumbrar protagonismos africanos em um âmbito mais global.

## **Palavras-Chave**

Antiguidade Tardia; África; diplomacia; Axum.

## A Giraffe for the Emperor: the “Embassies of Beasts”

Constantinople had an unusual summer in 496 CE. In that year, a diplomatic mission from distant lands arrived in the Roman metropolis accompanied by three exotic animals: an elephant and two giraffes (Brown, 2018: 96). These beasts were gifts that would be delivered to Emperor Anastasius I and then taken to the *vivarium*, the "garden of beasts" that, according to Columella, would serve for controlled hunting games or simply for the aristocratic delight of getting in contact with wild nature (Columella, 1954: 420–421).

The arrival of these animals was so expressive that it secured a place in the chronicle of Count Marcellinus, who wrote:

India Anastasio principi elephantum, quem Plautus poet noster lucabum nomine dicit, duasque camelopardalas pro munere misit.

India sent, as a gift to Emperor Anastasius, an elephant – which our poet Plautus calls the Lucanian Ox [Lūca bōs] – and two giraffes (Croke, 1995: 31).

On the way from “India” to Constantinople, diplomats and their impressive creatures also caused awe. Timothy of Gaza, for example, recalled that a man passed through his city accompanied by an elephant and two giraffes (Haupt, 1869: 15) – and given that little more than a decade later giraffes were decorating mosaics of a synagogue in that same city, it is possible to affirm that Timothy was not the only inhabitant of the region to take note of the animals (Ovadia, 1969: 195).

All this amazement was understandable. Even though they were relatively familiar to the Romans, elephants were still massive creatures that evoked the memory of Hannibal, whose threat was immortalized by the words of Livy: *inhumana crudelitas, perfidia plus quam Punica*, "inhuman cruelty, perfidy more than Punic" (Livy, 1969: 10–11). Giraffes, however, were much rarer. Pliny the Elder tells us that the Romans saw them for the first time in the circus games that Caesar organized in commemoration of his military triumphs (Pliny, 1967: 52–53) – information corroborated by Cassius Dio (Dio, 1956: 252–253). Pliny goes on to say that, from that moment onwards, giraffes were occasionally brought to Rome: one of them captivated the audience watching the triumph of Augustus in 29 BCE, as Horace also reminds us (Horace, 1942: 412–413); Pausanias saw them in Rome, probably at the time of the triumph of Lucius Verus in 165 CE (Pausanias, 1989: 45–46); Herodian mentions that, in 192 CE, Commodus played games with animals from all over the world, “from India to Ethiopia,” and it would not be strange to imagine that giraffes were included (Herodianus, 2005: 23–24).

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However, Pierre-Louis Gatier reminds us that from 248 CE onwards, giraffes are no longer seen in Rome (or, at least, are not recorded in any testimony that has come down to us). After the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Constantinople becomes the new stage for these animals, and when they do appear, the context is no longer of games or triumph, but diplomacy (Gatier, 1996: 918–919). In other words, between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, exotic beasts ceased to fuel the politics of *panem et circenses*, “Bread and Circus”, and became a living language of political agreements, demonstrations of power and arguments of authority. It is in this sense that Eusebius, for example, perceives the animals brought by Indian ambassadors to Constantine in 336 CE (Eusebius, 1999: 172), or that Philostorgius mentions that Constantius II received, from the “king of India”, a stuffed baboon known as *Pan* (Philostorgius, 2007: 48).

Despite the inherent pragmatism of diplomacy between kings and emperors, the most eloquent example of “animal embassies” is a work of fiction: Heliodorus of Emesa's *Aithiopiká*, which was written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE but whose narrative takes place in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Pinheiro, 2014: 76–87). In this work, Heliodorus narrates the love story between Theagenes, a Greek from Thessaly, and Chariclea, the daughter of King Hydaspes and Queen Persinna of Ethiopia. Chariclea, the daughter of black parents, was born with skin the colour of marble because her mother admired a statue during her pregnancy. Fearing the wrath of Hydaspes at her daughter's unexpected complexion, Persinna sends Chariclea to Egypt, and from there she goes to Delphi, where she grows up to become a priestess of Artemis. The tale of Theagenes and Chariclea ends in the Nubian (or “Ethiopian”) lands of Meroë, when Hydaspes was about to inadvertently sacrifice his own daughter in commemoration of his victory over the Persians in Egypt. Fortunately, for Chariclea and Theagenes, everything ends well, but what really interests us in the outcome of this novel is to note the grandiose procession of tributary nations that went to Meroe to salute the victory of Hydaspes: first, the *seres*, the Chinese, who brought cloths of resplendent purple and white silk; then the Arabs, who offered aromatic plants, cassia, cinnamon, and other fragrant spices; then came the Troglodytes, Africans from the Red Sea, bringing gold; after these came the Blemmyae, from Lower Nubia, with bows and arrows made of serpent bone; and, finally, came the delegation of the Aksumites. This was the most important delegation, because it did not come from a tributary nation, but from a sovereign land – and it was precisely the Aksumite delegation that brought the most impressive gift: an animal of a haunting nature, taller than a camel, but with the fur of a leopard and a large neck that resembled that of a swan. The astonished

crowd immediately gave this animal a name, calling it a “leopard camel” (Heliodoro, 1979: 456–459). It was, of course, a giraffe.

Heliodorus' *Aithiopiká* creates a fictional setting in which the “Ethiopian” king – that is, a Nubian monarch of Meroë – is the man who sits on the throne in the centre of the world. His power guarantees him the obedience of Chinese, Arabs, Troglodytes and Blemmyae, but also guarantees him the diplomatic respect (or recognition) of a non-subject ruler: the king of Aksum, whose historical title is that of *Nəgusä Nəgäst*, “King of the Kings” (Phillipson, 2012: 79). This respect is demonstrated by a giraffe, an exotic gift that is rare enough to live up to the sovereignty of both leaders. But why a giraffe and not, say, an elephant, a hippopotamus, or a rhinoceros? After all, weren't these animals equally rare and exotic?

In this essay, we will draft an answer to this question – and to do so, we must carry out an inversion: it is not our interest, from here, to look at where the embassies arrive, but rather to think about from where they leave. After all, for the last thousands of years, the only natural habitat of the giraffe are the savannas and forests of Africa South of the Sahara, which, at first, would make us imagine that diplomatic missions accompanied by this animal must be African. From this observation, other questions that can be explored in this text arise: 1) what is the role of societies from Africa South of the Sahara in the “global” diplomatic games of Late Antiquity? And 2) from this questioning, can we reframe our conception of Late Antiquity – thinking especially about Diplomatic History and Global History?

### **Savannah Diplomacy: Africa South of the Sahara in Late Antiquity**

*Giraffa camelopardalis*, the only species of giraffe recognized by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, is divided into nine subspecies distributed through the centre, east and south of the African continent, with the highest concentration being in Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, in the Botswana, South Africa, Namibia, and Mozambique (Williams, 2011: 45). In considerably smaller numbers, giraffes are also found in South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Uganda and in regions of the Chad and Niger basins. Despite the more restricted distribution to the east and south, it is possible that giraffes were endemic to the entire Sahel – reaching Senegal – until a few thousand years ago (Hassanin et al., 2007: 266–267). There is, for example, evidence that giraffes inhabited parts of North Africa and the entire length of the Nile Valley until the passage from the fourth to the third millennium BCE (Zivotofsky; Zivotofsky; Amar,

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2002: 204). Despite this, everything indicates that even in earlier historical times, populations of giraffes were largely restricted to the same regions they are today (though probably in greater numbers). This means that the presence of these animals in Egypt and nearby regions, since Antiquity, was the result of contacts with more southern or eastern regions: representations of giraffes in Egyptian art, for example, were not necessarily common and seem to be constantly accompanied by Nubians – or at least indicate contacts with Nubia (Kozloff, 1979: 334).

The Graeco-Latin documentation, although not very precise, also seems to indicate that giraffes came from the south/southeast of the known territories of Africa. Agatharchides of Cnidus, perhaps the first Greek author to describe a giraffe, said that they originated in the “land of the Troglodytes” (Agatharchides, 1989: 120–121), while Pliny pointed to “Ethiopia” (Pliny, 1967: 50– 51). Here, it is important to emphasise that neither *Troglodytikē* nor *Aethiopia* indicate an exact region, but only imagined exotic scenarios or more or less defined cardinal points – some other authors even believed that giraffes came from “India”, as Count Marcellinus himself, who was mentioned above (Schneider, 2016: 184–188). Therefore, if we are guided only by Graeco-Latin accounts and Nilotic artistic representations, the giraffes that figured in the Ancient World came from southern Nubia – but if we extrapolate and take into account our (partial) knowledge of the historical distribution of giraffes, we could suppose that they also came from Chad or even Uganda or Kenya.

In any case, the habitat of ancient giraffes was far from urban centres and, to a large extent, embedded in territories not mapped by available documentation. However, even if they were rare animals, there is evidence that taming techniques were known: for example, the Theban tomb TT100, of the Egyptian vizier Rekhmire (c. 1400 BCE), has among its adornments the image of two Nubians guiding a giraffe through ropes tied to its forepaws – and its docile character is reiterated with the curious addition of a baboon climbing its neck (Anthony, 2017: 20–23).



**Figure 01:** Nubians with a Giraffe and a Monkey. Reproduction of a painting in the Theban Tomb TT100, of the Egyptian Vizier Rekhmire. The image is in the public domain. Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544613>.

Similarly, a wall painting at the temple of Beit al-Wālī (c. 1250 BCE) features a Nubian procession in honour of Ramesses II filled with exotic animals, including a baboon similar to that of the tomb TT100, and a giraffe guided by a rope, but this time tied to its muzzle (Mitchell, 2002: 1).



**Figure 02:** Nubian procession with animals, including a giraffe and a monkey. Reproduction of a wall painting at the temple of Beit al-Wālī. Image rights: Lankaart. Available at: <http://www.lankaart.org/article-36313782.html>.

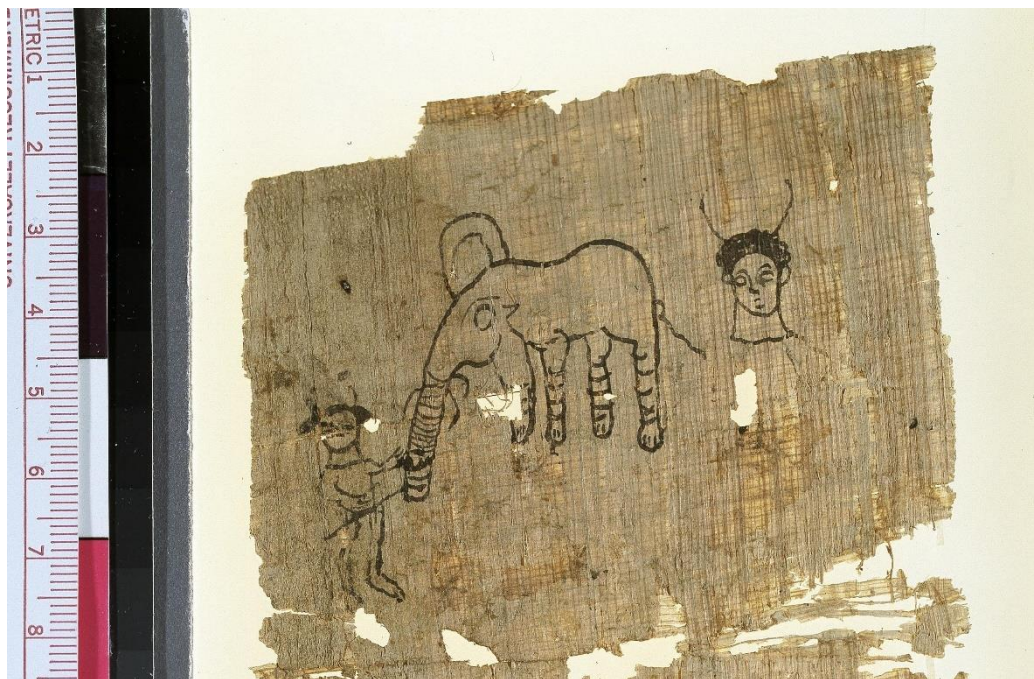
It's not just Egyptian art that indicates the possibility of controlling a giraffe, but their presence in embassies, missions, processions, and trips in the thousand-year span that separates Vizier Rekhmire from Emperor Anastasius proves that they were tamed enough not to offer danger in public situations (here, we could make a comparison with strategies of capturing and taming elephants, which ended up playing a role similar to that of giraffes). Now, who captured and tamed these animals? Nubians, perhaps. But if giraffes came from territories further south or east (like Uganda or Kenya), we would certainly have a process involving mediating societies or herders and hunters operating direct and indirect contacts. Could the giraffe be, then, a way of thinking about medium and long-distance connection in Africa South of the Sahara?

It is evident that, so far, when we extrapolate our written or artistic documentation, we are working completely in the field of conjecture. Still, it seems unlikely to me that broader contacts (and not attested by more traditional sources) would not happen. After all, why would Agatharchides or Pliny have knowledge of local exchanges between Nubians and, say, southern Nilotic societies, such as the Luo, who historically inhabited – and still inhabit – regions of South Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Congo, Kenya and Tanzania (Campbell, 2006: 73–85)? So, based on these hypotheses (which, I repeat, are not attested by the usual documentation we have available), let us make a brief epistemological parenthesis before proceeding to Late Antiquity: lack of evidence is not proof in itself. When dealing with the past, the silences are as eloquent as the voices immortalized on the walls, in papyri, and in manuscripts. Thus, if we take into account how much we are dependent on written texts – and how these written texts are, for the most part, Graeco-Latin –, we can admit that we have very little access to a tiny window into the past. This is especially important when dealing with pre-Modern Africa, as almost all social, political and cultural movements, contacts, and organizations that have escaped Greek and Latin eyes (but also Egyptian, Nubian or Ethiopian eyes) rest in complete documentary silence. However, it is obvious that there were, yes, social, political and cultural movements, contacts, and organizations beyond the narrow horizons of our historical knowledge. This gap in our historical apprehension must never imply that there was no dynamism in those spaces unknown to our sources. Therefore, however exaggerated they may be, arguments such as Alice Werner's (that Herodotus was referring to Khoisan societies when he spoke of the *Trōglodytai*) or Krzysztof Morta (that the “African” name of giraffes recorded by Agatharchides, *nabous*, can also have a Khoisan origin) are, to a greater or lesser extent, possible (Morta, 2014: 82; Werner, 1925: 118): because we simply do not know the intricacies of the History of the African

interior in Antiquity, and the belief, reinforced by this lack of knowledge, that direct or indirect contacts between societies more or less distant would not occur, rests on an Africanist primitivism – to use the concept of Valetín Mudimbe – that borders on racialism and, therefore, has no space in a critical contemporary historiography (Mudimbe, 2019). Our epistemological dependence on a specific type of documentation (writing) that is, sometimes, not part of the cultural core of certain societies, and our consequent apprehension that the lack of such documentation indicates a lack of historical development, is a relic of a Eurocentric and supremacist Philosophy of History, and, therefore, must be intensely questioned – especially when the object of study concerns the African continent.

Perhaps the implications of this epistemological *excursus* will become more evident if we leap into Late Antiquity. So, let us remember Anastasius' giraffes. When Count Marcellinus reports the arrival of the animals in Constantinople, he informs us that the embassy was “Indian” – which, in this context, is a dubious term and may indicate Africa, Arabia or parts of Asia. Although elephants are native to both Equatorial Africa and South and Southeast Asia (so it would make sense for an Indian delegation to arrive with Asian pachyderms), we have seen that giraffes are uniquely African. This leaves us with three possible interpretations: the embassy was, in fact, Arab and imported the animals from Asia and/or Africa; the embassy was Indian and imported the giraffes from Africa; or the embassy was African and was accompanied by an African elephant. Any of these options also implies the following consideration: which path did the embassy take? We know from Timothy of Gaza that it passed through Gaza after leaving al-‘Aqaba, known at the time as Ayla (Haupt, 1869: 15; Whitcomb, 1997: 359). As al-‘Aqaba is an important port city, there is a good chance that the embassy came across the Red Sea. Despite this, Irfan Shahīd argued that the diplomatic mission came from southern Arabia, more specifically from Ḥimyar, and took an overland route – according to him, if the mission had come from Africa, it would have passed through Clysmā, in the Gulf of Suez (Shahīd, 1995: 28–29). Given the high shipping traffic on the Red Sea, it seems unlikely that a royal delegation accompanied by rare animals would decide to take a long and dangerous route overland. Taco Terpstra, on the other hand, treats the embassy as an effectively Indian commercial caravan, and claims that it may have caught some giraffes “in a port on the African coast” (Terpstra, 2019: 180). This scenario is even more dubious, especially because, after discussing the rarity and possible geographic difficulty of catching giraffes, we can imagine that they would not be easily available as luxury goods in port cities. However, there is one additional piece of information ignored by Terpstra and discarded by Shahīd: the papyrus fragment *P. Mich. inv. 4290*.

According to Stanley Burstein, this document contains parts of a letter sent by a Roman official to a colleague in the late 5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> century, and there is a draft, on the back of the fragment, of an elephant which, although rudimentary, presents features that could identify it as an African elephant: sloping forehead, wide ears, and concave back (Burstein, 1992: 55–57). Furthermore, as Burstein points out, the inclusion of a trainer using a stick on the trunk area indicates that the author of the letter witnessed a trained elephant in person (Burstein, 1992: 55). From the dating of the papyrus and the fact that, as we have seen, animals of this size could not be seen in games after the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, but only in diplomatic missions, there are great chances that this draft represents precisely the elephant that accompanied the two giraffes at the embassy to Anastasius I.



**Figure 03:** fragment of papyrus *P. Mich. inv. 4290* with the illustration of an elephant, a trainer and a masculine bust. Image in public domain. Available at: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-2181/4290V.TIF-2>.

Putting the information together, we then have two African giraffes, a possibly African elephant, and a sea route across the Red Sea to the Gulf of al-‘Aqaba. There are reasons, therefore, to believe that the delegation came from Africa – probably from the Empire of Aksum, as Burstein conjectures (Burstein, 1992: 56). At the turn of the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Aksum was an empire of great authority in northeast Africa: in addition to controlling the important port of Adulis, since the 4<sup>th</sup> century, under the rule of *Nägusä Nägäst 'Ezana*, Aksum had extended its domains and influences over Meroë, the Nubian capital of the Kingdom of Kush (Munro-Hay, 1991: 75–

85). Therefore, from its Aksumite throne, the *Nəgusä Nəgäst* controlled present-day Eritrea, Ethiopia, northern Somalia, and parts of Sudan. This means that both the internal trade and the external trade of the African continent, carried out through the “Eritrean Sea” (the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean), eventually passed through Aksum's control. This centrality is attested through archaeological and numismatic evidence: for example, Aksum was the only African political organisation to mint its own coins in Late Antiquity – a practice that extended from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Munro-Hay, 1991: 180). Furthermore, external reports, such as the *Khristianikē Topographía*, Christian Topography, by the Egyptian monk Cosmas “Indicopleustes”, can, with a certain degree of precision, describe the level of Aksumite influence and hegemony in northeast Africa. Cosmas claims that, at the request of the *Nəgusä Nəgäst* Kālēb (also known as Elesbaan), he made a copy of a Greek inscription, located on the throne of the port city of Adulis, to be sent to Aksum, the capital (Cosmas Indicopleustes, 2010: 57–59). This inscription, now referred to as *Monumentum Adulitanum* II, was probably made in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and describes Aksumite military conquests in northeastern Ethiopia and eastern Arabia along the coast of the Red Sea (Cosmas Indicopleustes, 2010: 59–66).

From the economic and military expansion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, Aksum reached its peak in the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, during the government of Kālēb – precisely the period in which Cosmas visited the region. Around 525, the *Nəgusä Nəgäst* led a successful campaign against the kingdom of Ḥimyar in the *Arabia Felix* region (present-day Yemen), thus expanding the Aksumite power to Asia as well. The dominance of the two coasts of the Red Sea made this African empire a key player in the global political scenario of Late Antiquity, so that even the Eastern Roman Empire sought to establish friendly relations – with the intention, as noted by Procopius of Caesarea (Procopius, 1914: 178–179) and John Malalas (Malalas, 1986: 268–269), of gaining an important ally in the war against the Persians.

However, for our story, the military success of Kālēb is of less interest than a specific (and curious) development of his campaigns: the “Year of the Elephant”. Alluded to in the *sūrah* 105 of the al-Qur’ān (*al-fīl*, “the Elephant”), the *‘ām al-fīl*, “Year of the Elephant”, is the name given to the year 570/571, the traditional date of birth of Prophet Muḥammad. The designation *‘ām al-fīl* comes from an alleged attempt to invade Mecca by a Yemeni army that was accompanied by war elephants. The leader of this expedition was Abrehā, an Aksumite general who had taken the crown of *Arabia Felix* for himself: when Kālēb defeated King Yūsuf Dhū Nuwās of

Ḥimyar in 525, he installed a puppet ruler, Sumūyafa ‘Ashwa’, to represent the African throne. This arrangement was short-lived, and perhaps even in 525, Abrehā, who had led the expeditions against Dhū Nuwās, deposes the puppet king with the support of Aksumite soldiers who planned not to return to Africa and settle in Arabia (Bowersock, 2017: 19-20). Despite Kālēb's military attempts to displace Abrehā, both ended up sealing fragile deals, but for all intents and purposes, the general comes to reign independently. However, in addition to being ambitious, Abrehā was also an ardent Christian, and he appears to have erected a large church, called *al-Qalīs*, in the Yemeni city of Ṣan‘ā’, certainly aiming for it to become a major centre of pilgrimage in Arabia (Ibn al -Kalbi, 1950: 40). As Mecca already played the role of the religious centre of Central Arabia, Abrehā decided that it should be destroyed and, according to Arab and Islamic tradition, marched against the city accompanied by an army of elephants (Tha‘labī, 2002: 733–744). The campaign was a failure, and Abrehā did not even manage to enter the city, having died soon after.

This narrative appears to be, to some extent, more allegorical than factual, as there are serious dating problems – if Abrehā took power around 525, it would be unlikely that he was leading an expedition in 570, so either Prophet Muḥammad was not born in the “Year of the Elephant”, or the “Year of the Elephant” occurred long before 570, altering the age of the Prophet of Islam considerably (Conrad, 1987: 237–238). Anyway, some elements of Abrehā's narrative in Mecca are striking. Ibn Kathīr, in his Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*), states that the Aksumite general tried to march against Mecca with 8 or 12 pachyderms, led by a gigantic elephant known as Maḥmūd (Al-mubarakpuri, 2000: 580). Ibn Kathīr wrote in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but earlier sources seem to agree that Abrehā had at least one elephant notable for being much larger than the others (Charles, 2018: 170). Regardless of the historicity of the “Year of the Elephant” or even Abrehā's Arab campaign, Michael Charles reminds us that elephants, according to Arab tradition from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards, were closely linked to Ethiopian power in Africa and Asia – indeed, elephants were, possibly, a regal symbol of the Aksumites (Charles, 2018: 172–186). Thus, it would make sense (both symbolically and historically) for Abrehā to employ a “regal elephant” to lead his military entourage: the animal would represent not only strength but also regality. In this line of argument, Michael Charles claims that Maḥmūd was an African bush elephant (*Loxodonta Africana Africana*), the largest known land animal (Charles, 2018: 166–192).

These informations, when placed next to the papyrus *P. Mich. inv. 4290* mentioned earlier, reinforce the idea that the “Indian” mission that reached

Anastasius in 496 was, in fact, an Aksumite embassy, probably sent by Kālēb or his predecessors, Tezana/Ousas or Nezana/Nezool (Munro-Hay, 1991: 67–68). Let us see the reasons to believe this: the designation “Indian”, used by Count Marcellinus, follows a Graeco-Latin pattern of referring generally to the regions of Ethiopia and Arabia as “India” – John Malalas himself calls Kālēb, interchangeably, *Basileys tōn Ayxoymitōn*, “Emperor of the Ashumites”, and *Basileys tōn Indōn*, “Emperor of the Indians”, besides mentioning that this ruler received a Roman embassy from Justinian with great pomp, seated on a throne-chariot carried by four elephants (Malalas, 1831: 457–458); the year 496, also indicated by Count Marcellinus, encompasses a period of great Aksumite strength, which had been amassing more and more control since the 4<sup>th</sup> century and had reached its political peak in the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century – that is, the last years of the 5<sup>th</sup> century were the antechamber of Kālēb's conquests, which certainly placed Aksum on a level to enact forms of imperial diplomacy; the elephant and the two giraffe that accompanied the embassy were African animals (*Giraffa camelopardalis* and probably *Loxodonta Africana*) – which does not automatically make the entourage African, but makes it much more difficult for it not to be; and, finally, elephants were animals linked to the Aksumite monarchical symbology in Late Antiquity, which would give a great sense of authority to the 496 embassy, that is, it would have not only been a trip to pay tribute to the emperor of the Romans, but an effective offer of friendship between equals – a friendship that certainly flourished in the following years during the governments of Justin I and Justinian (Bowersock, 2013: 142).

This argument can be more firmly established if we return, once again, to giraffes. As we saw earlier, these animals are exclusively African, which implies that any embassy carrying giraffes would need to have had contact (direct or indirect) with Africa. Not only that, but the *Giraffa Camelopardalis* inhabits very specific savannah regions of the continent, so it would not be through a quick foray into more familiar and accessible territories, such as North Africa, that these beasts would have been obtained. Thus, the difficulty in obtaining them, combined with the amazement caused by their inherent exoticism, made giraffes remarkable animals since Antiquity: artistic records show that giraffes were constant exchange currencies between Nubia and Egypt; they were also symbols of Rome's reach of authority when used in triumphs and games before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century; and, in Late Antiquity, they became important ambassadors. That said, let us also remember the narrative of Heliodorus of Emesa, who designed the authority of Aksum before the great King Hydaspes through, exclusively, a giraffe. In other words: for this 4<sup>th</sup> century novel, the regal symbol of the Aksumites was not the elephant, but the giraffe.

An argument similar to that of Heliodorus can be mirrored in the 6<sup>th</sup> century work of Cosmas "Indicopleustes". According to him, giraffes – animals found exclusively in Ethiopia – were captured and tamed as calves to be taken to the palace, where the *Nəgusä Nəgäst* would delight in the sight of these animals (Cosmas Indicopleustes, 2010: 359). Hence, the *Giraffa Camelopardalis* could be a palatial animal, directly linked to the ruler's entertainment (and, due to the difficulty in capturing and taming, also an exclusively regal animal). In other words, it seems to me that the giraffe would function as an Aksumite "business card": when tamed, the animal inhabited the palaces and, therefore, when present in embassies, it represented a symbol or a gift straight out of the royal rooms of Aksum. Thus, in Late Antiquity, it would be rare for another ruler in Europe or Asia to have access to giraffes without the agency of the *Nəgusä Nəgäst*. It is possible to argue that it is precisely this exclusivity that made an embassy accompanied by giraffes so important and, above all, so representative of Aksumite power.

As a result, it might be possible to say that the giraffe and the elephant represented two forms of Aksumite political-diplomatic language: the elephant showed strength and the giraffe, regality; one established dominance and the other, cordiality. Both were exotic and difficult to tame, which made them, when alive and present in political contexts, extremely eloquent in their role to make a lasting impression.

Now, we can go back to the embassy of 496 and come up with a reinterpretation: the arrival of an entourage with giraffes and an elephant would not be just another exotic passage in the daily life of the Roman Empire, as it can be inferred from the quick mention of Count Marcellinus. It would, in fact, be part of a broad network of political-diplomatic contacts that had been forming over time and would reach its peak in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when the military conflict between the Romans and the Persians would carry along the Aksumites, Ḥimyarites, and several other societies to the stage of war. In other words: the embassy of animals can open the curtain to a wider world, with more extensive networks, with more complex contacts, and with more diverse protagonisms than those shown by written Graeco-Latin sources - in fact, our dependence on this type of documentation seems to create a confirmation bias that reinforces a simplistic idea that the Roman Empire, during Late Antiquity, was the only effective centre of the world. Giraffes and elephants thus offer an investigative path that problematises our documentary approach and allows us to see – in this case – the consistent role of an African empire in our historical narrative.

Even though the evidence for this African “savannah diplomacy” is fragile – resting on small inferences from a variety of written sources and on the presence of large African animals throughout historical narratives – the above argument touches on the first question asked at the opening of this essay: what was role of sub-Saharan African societies in the “global” diplomatic games of Late Antiquity? Considering, then, the multipolarity of Afro-Eurasia to the detriment of a classical and traditional Romanocentric approach, we could say that the role of these societies (in our case, specifically Aksum) was that of forging political and economic ligatures within one (or several) World-System, which also included the Roman Empire, the Persian Empire, Arab monarchies, Indian kingdoms, Central Asian city-states and the Chinese Empire – which, until the Suí-Táng unification at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, was controlled by rival dynasties on a north-south axis (Skaff, 2012: 31–32). In other words, African kingdoms and empires were not peripheral characters in a unipolar (Roman) or bipolar (Roman-Persian) reality, but were participants in a multipolar Late Antiquity.

### **The Six Sovereigns of Earth: towards a Multipolar Late Antiquity**

Framing African societies, such as Aksum, in a more “global” late antique perspective implies establishing approaches supported by firm methodological paradigms. In this sense, we can resort to the World-System idea to think about different levels of multipolarity. World-System, as defined by Immanuel Wallerstein, indicates a supranational entity with a single division of labour and multiple cultures that are divided into centre, periphery and semi-periphery (Wallerstein, 1974: 390). In other words, the American sociologist conceives the World-System as an explanatory framework for the effects of capitalism in the world after the 16<sup>th</sup> century: capitalism, as a supranational entity, would force a global (capitalist) division of labour which, in turn, would create categories of centre, periphery and semi-periphery for the cultures (that is, for the national units) participating in this system, based on their capacity to participate in capitalism. Thus, the weights and scales of the capitalist World-System would be, for example, colonialism and imperialism – guarantors of the global division of labour. Obviously, Wallerstein's World-System cannot be applied to the pre-Modern world, but its explanatory bases were adapted to this period by authors such as Christopher Chase-Dunn, Thomas Hall and Janet Abu-Lughod (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Chase-Dunn; Hall, 1991). Abu-Lughod understands that, to better analyse Wallerstein's “Modern World-System”, it is necessary to

think about the embryo of a world economy before the European hegemony that was established after the 16<sup>th</sup> century – and, for that, the 13<sup>th</sup> century would present an ideal candidate for investigation (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 3–4). Based on this proposition, Aline Dias da Silveira notes, for example, how the “Lughodian” model of the World-System can be applied to a proposal of a “Global Middle Ages” (Silveira, 2019: 210–236). However, here a problem remains: if, for Abu Lughod, the 13<sup>th</sup> century is the culmination of a pre-Modern World-System, how do we think about Late Antiquity in this epistemological model? Here, we can take the arguments of Chase-Dunn and Hall, who defined a pre-capitalist World-System as “intersocietal networks in which the interaction (trade warfare intermarriage, etc.) is an important condition of the reproduction of the internal structures of the composite units and importantly affects changes which occur in these local structures” (Chase-Dunn; Hall, 1991: 7). In other words, the networks of interaction of Late Antiquity, insofar as they operate structural changes in participating societies, can be understood as a World-System.

This means that, in order to understand certain internal changes in the Roman Empire, it would be necessary to identify its forms of interaction with the Persian Empire. In turn, in order to fully appreciate the transformations of the Persian Empire, it is necessary to analyse the ways in which it interacts with the Arab kingdoms, and so on. However, it is essential to note that these interactions do not take place in isolated or bilateral levels but can be framed in a *game of multipolar scales*, that is, there are a number of centres in Late Antiquity that establish this Afro-Eurasian structure of interactions, and individual contacts can be understood, if necessary, within this expansive game of networks.

It seems to me that the game of multipolar scales of the late antique World-System is the most fruitful way of thinking about this period if our objective is to deploy Global History models. The contextualisation of the embassy of 496 made earlier follows this line. This mission can be read within the balances and tensions between different political and cultural centres, such as Rome, Persia, Arabia, the Indian Subcontinent and China.

However, for the idea of World-System (whether modern, medieval or late antique) to be of any use, it needs a conceptual depth that generates *analytical cohesion* – that is, World-System cannot be just a generic term for “contacts”, but these contacts need to be located within a network that makes internal sense, that follows “rules”, and that consistently includes all of its participants. In the case of Wallerstein's World-System, for example, capitalism defines the rules of contact, and the division of labour

is the point of cohesion for understanding it as a supranational structure (that is, effectively as a system).

Thus, in order to speak of a late antique World-System, we need to find a point of cohesion that allows us to frame the various forms of contact under the same logic of historical functioning. In the absence of a globalised economy, perhaps the division of labour, as in the modern case, is not a viable option – nor commercial effervescence, as in the case of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. For Late Antiquity, then, a satisfactory point of cohesion can be found in *diplomacy*. The political and symbolic language of embassies is a “supranational” language that allows us to place, on the same stage of interaction, a series of different societal and cultural units. This is especially important for Late Antiquity (understood here, roughly, as the interval between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries) because in this period we have a “balance of empires” that end up defining client societies in their orbits. This allows, for example, Rome, Persia, and Aksum to share the same *diplomatic language* and operate in the same political tuning of mutual recognition.

To better illustrate and embody this postulate, let us look at a famous wall painting in the Umayyad palace of Qusayr ‘Amra, located in the Jordan desert. Built by caliph al-Walid ibn ‘Abd al-Malik between 711 and 715 (Fowden, 2018: 21), this castle bears, on one of its walls, the image of six important sovereigns of the world, and four of them can be partially identified from Greek and Arabic inscriptions: KAISAR, the “Caesar” of Rome; RODORIKOS, or Roderic, King of the Visigoths of Toledo; KOSROËS, or Khosraw, the famous Sasanian shah of Persia; and Najāshī (for which the only surviving inscription is the Arabic, not the Greek), a 7<sup>th</sup> century *Nəgusä Nəgäst* of the Aksumites.



**Figure 4:** Badly damaged wall painting at Qusayr ‘Amra depicting the “six kings”. Public Domains. Available at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sixkings.jpg>.

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These names, however, did not necessarily designate specific rulers, but rather titles, in Arabic, for the rulers of each locality: *Qaysar* for the Roman emperor, *Lūdhriq* for the Visigothic king, *Kisrā* for the Persian shah, and *Najāshī* for the Aksumite *Nəgusä Nəgäst* (Fowden, 2018: 205). Recognition of the political role of these leaders is interesting because it gives importance and legitimacy to different Afro-Eurasian power centres. Marco di Branco even argues that this painting alludes to an important passage in the life of Prophet Muḥammad, when he sends envoys to the main “sovereigns of the world”, including the Romans, Persians and Aksumites (Di Branco, 2007: 597–620; Ibn Ishāq, 2004: 652–659). That is, according to these traditions, Prophet Muḥammad understood that the world was divided and ordered by some specific sovereigns, and this understanding – which, as evidenced by Quṣayr ‘Amra's painting, was inherited by the later caliphates – allowed him to modulate his diplomatic language obeying (or at least recognizing) a certain balance of power. This “imperial ordering” seems to be a very fundamental pillar of Late Antiquity, and that is why that, when analysing the game of multipolar scales, we can conceive the diplomatic language of political recognition as a cohesion axis.

Thus, it is important to remember that this “divided world” of Late Antiquity is not only based on the Roman-Persian bipolar order, nor is it divided only along religious lines: it is much broader, and also includes Africa. Of course, written sources (especially Graeco-Latin) may not explicitly bring this recognition, but when we consider embassies, for example, as a form of contact *inserted in a multipolar World-System*, we end up with important evidence to think about a kind of late antique globality.

### Concluding Notes: Africa and Late Antiquity

The field of foreign policy and diplomacy in Late Antiquity is vast (Zétola, 2010), and the same can be said about research dealing with Global History (Santos Júnior; Sochaczewski, 2017; Silva, 2020). It is precisely from the successful establishment of these fields that this essay delimited its general objective: to mobilise the erudition of these fields in order to think of a late antique World-System based on diplomatic language as a point of conceptual cohesion of multipolarity. This general objective, however, remained in the background, underlying the point that effectively gave substance to this discussion: the Aksumite giraffes as an example of the possibility of consistently approach Africa as a constituent of this multipolar system. The ideological construction of the dominant (Western) historiography sedimented Romanocentric/Eurocentric approaches that

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subordinated African protagonism in all sorts of historical times (Keita, 2005: 1-30). Therefore, finding ways to privilege African themes in Late Antiquity not only makes room for a strengthening of the field but also moves us toward correcting, albeit in a very tiny way, the supremacist/Eurocentric problem of historical academic studies.

Giraffes, elephants, and “embassies of beasts” were taken, in this essay, as a common thread to think about politics, space, contacts – that is, to think about a *multipolar diplomatic language*. This took us to the domains of Aksum and its insertion into the global theatre of Late Antiquity. Aksum, however, is not the only African society (South of the Sahara) that can be studied: the Nubian kingdoms of Makuria, Nobatia and Alodia; Wàgádù and the Sonike people of the Western Sahel; or even Somali merchants and “proto-Swahili”, are societies, spaces and themes that deserve attention and prominence. If we think, therefore, of a Multipolar Late Antiquity, we must also think of Africa – this, of course, poses documental challenges, because written Graeco-Latin accounts do not always manage to grant us access to this desired globality. It is necessary, then, to open up the scope of sources, and it is in this opening that we can follow the trails of the savanna and understand the “animal diplomats” as part of a political language fully inserted in the context of a Multipolar and Global Late Antiquity.

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