

EMERALDS AND EMBASSIES IN *THE ETHIOPIAN STORY OF HELIODORUS*

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In *The Ethiopian story* of Heliodorus reference is made to a dispute between the Persians and the Ethiopians over control of the emerald mines to the south of Egypt. This disagreement leads to war between these two nations and sets the action of the plot of the novel in motion. When taken together with the similar manner in which precious stones are viewed in *The Ethiopian story* and in the pseudo-Orphic *Lithica* — a poem about the magical properties of stones dated to the fourth century of our era — the argument over possession of the mines can convincingly be placed in the context of the political and religious changes taking place at this time in Ethiopia, as documented by Epiphanius of Cyprus in his sermon *On the gems*. Under Constantine and his successor Constantius II embassies were exchanged with the Ethiopians, specifically with the people of Axum (who appear to have displaced the people of Meroe from power at about 350), the Blemmyes, and the Indians. The fact that embassies involving these peoples feature prominently in *The Ethiopian story* also provides yet more circumstantial evidence to suggest that the novel belongs to a similar fourth-century milieu to other texts from the same period, especially the anonymous *Lithica* and the *Περὶ Καταρχῶν* (*On Beginnings*) of Maximus of Ephesus.

Introduction

The events narrated in *The Ethiopian story* of Heliodorus purport to have taken place at the time of the Persian occupation of Egypt (about 525-332 BC).¹ Throughout the novel Persians rule the land and it is they who are supposed to have come into conflict with the Ethiopians over control of Philae and the emerald mines to the south of Egypt (*Aeth.* 2.32.2, 8.1.3, 9.6.5, 9.26.2, 10.11.1).² The retrospective projection of the dramatic date of the work into the Classical period of Greek history was conventional in the ancient novels. Chariton, for example, who in all probability wrote his novel in the first century of our era, placed the action of his *Chaereas and Callirhoe* in the time of Hermocrates, the tyrant of

¹ For the basic facts concerning the *Ethiopian story*, see Morgan 1996 (the dramatic date of the work is discussed on p. 435).

² Morgan discusses the emerald mines very briefly in his Oxford PhD thesis (Morgan 1979:1.60-61).

Syracuse in the fifth / fourth century BC, known to history from the writings of Thucydides.³ However, despite the fact that the ancient novelists in general (and Heliodorus in particular) aimed to enhance the veracity of their narratives by adopting a ‘historical pose’ as if they were writing authentic history,⁴ the illusion that the action of the novels takes place in the glorious period of Greek history is not consistently maintained and the reader becomes aware that details of the narrative are better understood in terms of the real world of the contemporary Roman Empire.⁵ In the absence of any incontrovertible ‘smoking gun’ proof for the date of composition of the novels, the circumstantial evidence arising from such cracks in the conventional facade of the dramatic date becomes vitally important for establishing an approximate time period during which these works were written.⁶

The references to the emerald mines to the south of Egypt in the *Ethiopian story* exemplify the problem at hand particularly well. The historical record concerning relations between Persia and Ethiopia in the Classical period is based on the narrative provided by Herodotus, and Heliodorus certainly made extensive use of the work of his famous predecessor.⁷ However, although emeralds were known to Herodotus, who mentions that the famous ring of Polycrates consisted of an emerald (σμάραγδος) set in gold (3.41), he makes no mention of any dispute between the Persians and the Ethiopians over emerald mines. According to Herodotus, the invasion of Ethiopia by the Persian king Cambyses was exploratory

³ For this see Hunter 1994.

⁴ For the ‘historical pose’ of Heliodorus, see Morgan 1982.

⁵ This is particularly noticeable in Achilles Tatius, for example (see Hilton 2009). For a reading of Chariton in terms of the realities of the Roman world, see Schwarz 2003.

⁶ A conspicuous example of this is the comparison between the siege of Syene in Book 9 of the novel and the siege of Nisibis as described by the emperor Julian in his panegyrics for Constantius II (*Or.* 1 and 3). The debate on this point in the scholarly literature has been extensive and complex, but the discussions of Morgan 1996 and Bowersock 1994 have convincingly shown that the fourth-century siege of Nisibis did influence Heliodorus’ account of the siege of Syene in the novel and both conclude that his fictional narrative was composed in the fourth century of our era, most probably at the time of the emperor Julian. See Hilton 2012a for further arguments in support of this conclusion. Ross 2014 also argues convincingly that Heliodorus’ account of the siege of Syene makes use of the ‘face of battle’ style of describing sieges in fourth-century historiography, as can be seen in the narrative of the siege of Amida in Ammianus Marcellinus 18.9-19.9.

⁷ Many examples could be given, but the parallel between the lake-dwelling herders (Hld. 1.5) and the Paeonians described in Herodotus (5.16) is sufficient to demonstrate this point.

in nature (Hdt. 3.17) and, although it ended in failure (3.25), the Ethiopians continued to pay tribute consisting of gold, ebony, ivory, and ‘five Ethiopian boys’ to the Persians in Herodotus’s day (3.97).⁸ Consequently, the situation in *The Ethiopian story*, in which a war between the Persians and the Ethiopians over Philae and the emerald mines ended in the defeat of the Persians, is clearly not based on the fifth-century historical record, nor can any comparable incident be found in the fourth century. Instead Heliodorus has chosen to depart radically from the dramatic context of his novel, despite the fact that he clearly intended his reader to believe that his account was a ‘history’, as noted above. Why has he done so? The answer to this question lies in assessing the importance of precious stones in *The Ethiopian story*. However, it is important to note that Heliodorus does not substitute fiction for historical content in respect of his account of how Persians and Ethiopians came into conflict with one another. The historical context that he has in mind, however, is a very different one from that of Herodotus, and has much more to do with the concerns of the fourth century of our era.

Precious stones in The Ethiopian story

Precious stones play an important part in *The Ethiopian story*.⁹ In addition to providing the cause of war between the Ethiopians and Persians, which sets the action of the plot in motion and brings about the return of Chariclea to Ethiopia and her reconciliation with her parents, gems feature as high value commodities that are greatly prized by bandits (1.3.2) and merchants such as Nausicles (5.15.1). However, jewels are also prized for their beauty, as Charicles’ description of the stones that Sisimthres gave to him shows (2.30.3):

He drew out a little pouch that he carried beneath his arm and opened it to reveal a prodigious display of precious stones: pearls the size of small nuts, perfectly spherical and glistening the purest white; emeralds and sapphires, the former as green as grass in springtime, their depths glowing with a luster as clear and soft as olive oil, the latter exactly the color of the sea in the shadow of a tall cliff, sparkling on the surface and a deep violet beneath. In short, all these gems, with their blend of many scintillating hues, were a sight to gladden the eye (tr. Morgan 1989).

⁸ For Herodotus’ treatment of the Ethiopians, see Romm 1994:49-60.

⁹ Elmer 2008:423 and n. 32 points out the importance of the emerald mines in the construction of the novel and notes that Chariclea is portrayed as Ethiopia’s most precious gem.

The description of the ‘Ethiopian amethyst’ on the ring given to Nausicles by Calasiris is the subject of a ‘purple passage’ (5.14) in which the engraver’s art stands by *synecdochē* for art in general, alluding to music (the flute melody), drama (the rock is a ‘bucolic theater’), and the play between the illusion of the scene represented and the reality of the material from which the work was created:

Every amethyst from India or Ethiopia is as I have described, but the stone that Kalasiris was now presenting to Nausikles was far superior to all others, for it had been incised and deeply carved to represent living creatures. The scene depicted was as follows: a young boy was shepherding his sheep, standing on the vantage point of a low rock, using a transverse flute to direct his flock as it grazed, while the sheep seemed to pasture obediently and contentedly in time to the pipe's melody. One might have said that their backs hung heavy with golden fleeces; this was no beauty of art's devising, for art had merely highlighted on their backs the natural blush of the amethyst. Also depicted were lambs, gamboling in innocent joy, a whole troop of them scampering up the rock, while others cavorted and frolicked in rings around their shepherd, so that the rock where he sat seemed like a kind of bucolic theater; others again, reveling in the sunshine of the amethyst's brilliance, jumped and skipped, scarcely touching the surface of the rock. The oldest and boldest of them presented the illusion of wanting to leap out through the setting of the stone but of being prevented from doing so by the jeweler's art, which had set the collet of the ring like a fence of gold to enclose both them and the rock. The rock was a real rock, no illusion, for the artist had left one corner of the stone unworked, using reality to produce the effect he wanted: he could see no point in using the subtlety of his art to represent a stone on a stone! Such was the ring (tr. Morgan 1989).

A special gem with magical properties, the pantarb stone, also plays a vital role in Heliodorus's novel. The heroine, Chariclea, is exposed at birth by her mother, the Ethiopian queen Persinna. The queen places a ring with the stone in the infant's swaddling bands in order to protect her with its magic power. The pantarb jewel later plays an important part in the recognition of Chariclea as the daughter of Hydaspes since the king recognises it as one he had given Persinna during their courtship (4.8.7; 10.14.3). In the narrative of Chariclea's birth (4.8.7) the ring serves a number of functions: as an engagement ring, it informs the reader of the loving relationship between Persinna and Hydaspes; as a seal it calls to mind the queen's royal status; and lastly as an apotropaic amulet it warns of the dangerous future which awaits the infant. In fact the ring later miraculously saves Chariclea's

life, as predicted in a dream, when the Persian queen Arsace attempts to have her burnt at the stake on a false charge of murder (8.11).¹⁰ Chariclea describes the ring as ‘set with a jewel called *pantarbē* and inscribed with certain sacred characters; it is full, it seems, of a supernatural and mystic property (τελετης, ὡς ἔοικε, θειοτέρας ἀνάμεστος), which I think must have endowed the stone with the power to repel fire and bestow immunity from the flames on its wearer’ (8.11.8). In the allegorical interpretation of *The Ethiopian story* by the Byzantine Neoplatonic philosopher Philip (ll. 119-131), the pantarb stone is interpreted as ‘that which fears all’ (τὸ πᾶν ταρβοῦσα), suggesting the it stands for fear of God, because God is all (τὸ πᾶν), rather than literally ‘fearing all things’ as stated by Theagenes (8.11).¹¹

The pantarb stone had a history in Greek literature prior to Heliodorus. Ctesias, for example, relates that pantarb stones had the power of attracting others to them (Jacoby F.3c688.F fr. 45.11-13 = Photius *Bib.* 72.45a28 [Bekker]), while Philostratus adds to this account the details that the stone is elusive but sheds a brilliant light (*VA* 3.46.10-18). Philostratus had also heard of such stones with magic powers that were found in the head of a mountain-snake (*VA* 3.8). To some extent these gems resemble the magical ring of Gyges in Herodotus and Plato (Hdt. 1.8-12; Plato *Rep.* 359d2-360d7) or the ‘uncorrupted’ stones in the mountains of the ‘real’ earth (*Phaedo* 110e). However, none of these accounts provide a convincing context in which to interpret Heliodorus’s narrative, which rather resembles the writings of Neoplatonists such as the fifth-century philosopher Damascius, who wrote about moon-stones that changed with the phases of the moon, and sun-stones that appeared have fire shining from them (*Vit. Is.* 119W).

Greco-Roman treatises on precious stones

A significant number of treatises on precious stones have survived from antiquity and it is in these accounts that the most likely mineralogical context for Heliodorus’s treatment of them should be sought. The ancient Greeks and Romans, like many other peoples, were generally fascinated by the magical properties of precious stones, gems, and jewels of all kinds.¹² The first substantial discussion of this subject to survive is that of Theophrastus, who wrote in the Hellenistic

¹⁰ This episode has often been taken as evidence of the fact that the novel was written at a time when the persecution of Christians was well known. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that Heliodorus was writing as a Christian — rather he appears to have been inspired by the Neoplatonic reinvigoration of traditional Hellenic religious ideas, as will be seen below. For discussion of this point, see Morgan 2005; Hilton 2012a.

¹¹ Tarán 1992:226-227.

¹² See the general discussions in King 1865; Kunz 1915.

period.¹³ This famous Peripatetic philosopher includes a wide range of green-coloured stones under the term *σμάραγδος* and attributes to them magical powers, such as the ability to change the colour of water (§23) and the power to aid vision (§24). He knew that Egypt was an important source (among others) of precious stones (but not specifically of emeralds) and he even specifies Syene and ‘the region called Psepho’ as the area most closely associated with them (§34). However, Syene is not known for its emeralds or jewels of any kind and the region that Theophrastus calls ‘Psepho’ is otherwise unknown. The commentators speculate that this region was ‘Psēbo’ (in Greek Ψηβώ) which they identify with Lake Tana in Ethiopia, but there is no ancient evidence of the mining of precious stones in this region. In any case Heliodorus cannot have had Theophrastus’ discussion of emeralds in mind, since his account nowhere alludes to any of the details mentioned in it. Had he known of Theophrastus’ account he would surely have placed the mines at Syene, where the war between the Ethiopians and the Persians in his novel is won.

It is also unlikely that Heliodorus made use of Pliny’s lengthy discussion of emeralds in Book 37 of his first-century encyclopaedia, *The natural history* (§16-19).¹⁴ Pliny believed, from information provided by Juba of Mauretania, that emeralds were mined in the hills of Egypt at a distance of twenty-five days’ journey from Coptos in the Thebais (§17, §18). This information needs to be corrected on the basis of Strabo’s more probable estimate that the trip only lasted six to seven days (17.815) and supplemented with the information that these mines were protected by Roman guards in the second / third century (Aelian 7.18, Ptol. 4.5.8 [see generally also Ptol. 4.5-15]). The name given by these writers to the hill from which the emeralds were mined was *Mons Smaragdus*. This is today Wadi Sikait in the eastern desert of Egypt where archaeological investigations have uncovered the ancient mine workings dating from the first to the sixth centuries of our era.¹⁵ There is no indication of the precise location of the emerald mines in *The Ethiopian story*, however, and the Elder Pliny can be safely eliminated from consideration as a possible source of information for Heliodorus, as no significant use of Pliny’s material can be detected in his work.

¹³ For the text and translation, see Caley & Richards 1956 and Eichholz 1965. Caley & Richards discuss emeralds in section 23 (pp. 97-104), cf. Eichholz pp. 102-107.

¹⁴ Text in Wright 2001, translation by Eichholz 1962.

¹⁵ Harrell 2004.

The pseudo-Orphic *Lithica* — a poem celebrating the magic powers of precious stones¹⁶ — is much more promising. This work was first dated to the reign of Constantius II by the famous English scholar and philanthropist, Thomas Tyrwhitt in 1781.¹⁷ Writing in Latin, Tyrwhitt argued in his introduction (pp. vi-xii) that verses 73-74 of the proem to the poem referred to the execution of the theurgist Maximus in the reign of Valens in terms of specific legislation against divination passed by the emperor Constantius II (25 January 357). Tyrwhitt is here referring to Cod. Theod. 9.16.4 (*sileat omnibus perpetuo divinandi curiositas. etenim supplicium capitis feret gladio ultore prostratus, quicumque iussu obsequium denegaverit*. ‘The inquisitiveness of all men for divination shall cease forever. For if any person should deny obedience to these orders, he shall suffer capital punishment, felled by the avenging sword’, tr. Pharr 1952). It is important that the charge — divination — for which Maximus was especially known, and the method of execution — decapitation by the sword — is specifically mentioned in the legislation, since the poem refers to the executed man as a Magus (line 72, ‘prophet’ in King’s translation) and mentions decapitation by the sword in the words ὁ μὲν ἐν κονίησιν ὑπ’ ἄορι κρατὸς ἀμερθεῖς / λευγαλέῳ θανάτῳ δῖος φῶς ἐκτετάνυσται (‘he lies stretched out in the dust deprived of his head by a sword in pitiful death, a divine man’, cf. Gesner’s Latin translation: *Et ille quidem in pulvere ense, abscisso capite, nemine lugente, / Tristi morte, divinus vir, extensus iacet.*)¹⁸ The gruesome torture and execution of Maximus is described in similar terms by Eunapius in his *Life of Maximus* 460 (tr. Wright 1921, cf. also Amm. Marc. 19.1.42, Zos. 4.14-15 for Valens’ jealousy of educated philosophers):

... therefore just as though in the person of Maximus they were punishing some god, they sent away with him into Asia a certain Festus, a man of a murderous disposition with the soul of a butcher, judging Asia to be a worthy abode for such a man. When he arrived he carried out his orders, and of his own accord even went beyond them and indulged to the top of his bent his beastlike and rabid temperament. For first he cut off the heads of

¹⁶ Barb 1963:117; Syria, the province of the Roman Empire from which Heliodorus originated, had strong associations with litholatry. For this, see Strömberg 1946.

¹⁷ Tyrwhitt 1781. For a brief biography of Tyrwhitt, see Caldwell 2004. Tyrwhitt was fond of detecting authorship through stylistic analysis. For example, he proved that poems attributed to Rowley were in fact composed by Thomas Chatterton. The text and a French translation of the *Lithica* can be found in Halleux & Schamp 1985. The only English translation of the *Lithica* is that of King 1865:375-396.

¹⁸ In King’s 1865 verse translation (p. 377) this is rendered as: ‘The god-like seer beneath the sword unjust / His head struck off lies out-stretch’d in the dust.’

many, guilty and innocent alike, and next he slaughtered Maximus, that great man.

Tyrwhitt adds that the dating of the *Lithica* was particularly difficult because the author had intentionally not recorded his name and had left personal details out of the poem, because the theurgical discussion of the magical powers of precious stones was punishable by torture and death at the time. For the same reason the *Lithica* survived in obscurity for eight centuries until the time of the 12th-century Byzantine poet and grammarian John Tzetzes, who wrongly attributed it to the authorship of Orpheus on the grounds that it followed Orphic poems bound in the same volume.

Further support for dating the *Lithica* to the fourth century has recently been advanced by Zito on the basis of close linguistic similarities between this poem and the astrological *Περὶ Καταρχῶν* (*On the Beginnings*) of Maximus of Ephesus (attributed to Maximus by the *Suda* s.v. *Μάξιμος*).¹⁹ Zito concludes her argument by referring not only to the linguistic similarities between the two texts but also to the shared interest in the animation of the statue of Hecate, the devotion to Hecate, and the rites necessary to invoke the gods in the *Περὶ Καταρχῶν*, and the power of magical stones to alter the will of the gods, the prominence of Helios, the animation of oracles, and the pervasive interest in Neoplatonic theurgy in the *Lithica*, to show that all this points towards the conclusion that the author of both

¹⁹ Zito 2012. Gerhard's 1820 text of Maximus is available as a Kessinger reprint (Gerhard 1820). Most scholars have followed Tyrwhitt's authority for the fourth century date of the *Lithica* (Halleux & Schamp 1985:52 and esp. n. 2), including West 1983:36. For contrary views, see Halleux & Schamp 1985:51-57. The charges brought against philosophers executed by Domitian, however, range from conspiracy, to atheism, and fighting as a gladiator — the use of divination is not especially prominent among them (see Dio Cassius 67.13). Similarly, other suggestions lack the specific details surrounding the beheading of Maximus by sword on a charge of divination, as mentioned in the *Lithica*. To suppose as King does (King 1865:6-7) that a Neoplatonic philosopher in the time of Valens would have dreamed of 'inveighing against Christianity', as he suggests he should have if he were writing at this time, is to misunderstand the climate of terror that prevailed among pagans after the death of Julian. King's suggestion of the Hellenistic period (the same time as the Orphic *Argonautika*) as a likely date for the poem is unlikely in view of the poem's explicit reference to divination, which suggests the *political* use of magic in predicting who would next become emperor. Halleux and Schamp place the poem in the 2nd century at the time of the Chaldaean Oracles attributed to Julian the Chaldaean and Julian the Theurgist (p. 56), but this, while slightly more plausible, does not adequately address the lament for the execution of the *δῖος φῶς* that so troubled the author of the *Lithica*.

poems must have been a member of the entourage of the emperor Julian.²⁰ It is striking that all of these motifs can also be traced in *The Ethiopian story*, which refers to moving statues (3.13), the necromancy of the witch of Bessa (6.15),²¹ the activity of the oracle at Delphi (2.27, 2.35), Helios (2.35, 4.8 and *passim*), magical stones (8.11), and sacrificial ritual (4.16).²²

The arguments advanced by Tyrwhitt and Zito can be supplemented by consideration of a sermon on the twelve gems on the breastplate of Aaron, the high-priest of the Jews (Exod. 28.15-21), composed by Epiphanius of Cyprus, which can also be dated to the fourth century.²³ This work was probably written in 394 but evidently referred to earlier unidentified treatises, possibly even the *Lithica*, by way of refutation and Christianization of the material contained within them.²⁴ The emerald is the third of the twelve stones described by Epiphanius in this text. The author notes that Roman emperors such as Nero and Domitian tended the hills in which this precious stone was found, ‘watering’ (i.e. polishing?) them to increase their green hue and sparkle. They were covetous of the emerald and ‘sought to find the[se] precious stones’.²⁵ According to the information at his disposal, Epiphanius initially locates these mines either in India or in Ethiopia — a common confusion in ancient geographical discussions,²⁶ but in another passage he is more specific, placing them near the Red Sea, from where travelers set out to India.²⁷ He states that this region was controlled by a number of kings, including one from Adoulis and another from Axum. Epiphanius adds that in his day new tribes had immigrated into this region: the Hindobeni, the Fish-Eaters, and the Sirindibeni (‘now other names have come in through immigrants from many

²⁰ Zito 2012:161-162.

²¹ Hilton 2017a (forthcoming).

²² Many of these details, especially the role of Helios and sacrifices in *The Ethiopian story*, are discussed in Hilton 2012b.

²³ Kim 2015:18 dates Epiphanius to the fourth century. Kim estimates that Epiphanius was in his middle to late seventies in 393 and that he was probably born at around 315. The sermon on the twelve gems survives mainly in a Georgian transcription. For the text and translation see Blake and de Vis 1934.

²⁴ Kim 2015:210. Epiphanius mentions these sources from time to time in his account. An analysis of Epiphanius in relation to the *Lithica* and Maximus’s astrological poem cannot be undertaken here.

²⁵ Blake & de Vis 1934:106.

²⁶ For this see Lesky 1959.

²⁷ Blake & de Vis 1934:108.

places’). At this point he adds the following observation, which is worth quoting in full:²⁸

Now, however, we shall speak of the mountain where the gem emerald is found. It is under the dominion of the king of the Romans. The name of the mountain is called emerald (*zmuriani*, i.e. *σμαραγδινός*). It is like an off-lying island and is opposite to Berenike, the point of departure for India, when one goes to the Thebaid, and lies off in the sea, about one day’s sail by vessel, i.e. about eighty miles (*milion*), and is contiguous to Berenike near the so-called Ivory Coast and is the hands of the tribe of the Blemmyes (Bleynielni), who rule many other places as well. At present strange heathen tribes extract (lit. cut out) the stone emerald and put it on the market.

Despite some confusion about the actual location of the mines on an island ‘off in the sea’, this quotation clearly shows that Epiphanius was aware of the name of the hill (*Mons Smaragdus*) from which the gems were extracted. He also speaks in the present tense (‘at present’) as if referring to the situation in his own day, stating that the hill is under the control of Blemmyes and that it is worked by barbarian tribes who mine the precious stones and trade them. He concludes his discussion of the emerald stating that it has mirror-like properties and the power to predict the future.

Political and religious upheavals in late antique Nubia

When this text is matched with the ethnographical information supplied by Heliodorus in *The Ethiopian story*, it becomes apparent that the fictional narrative reflects similar circumstances in the region as those referred to by Epiphanius, although it is not precise about the location of the mines. An embassy from the people of Axum, for example, is referred to as one of the delegations who travel to Meroe to congratulate Hydaspes on his victory over the Persians (10.27). Likewise the Blemmyes are noted as one of the contingents that made up the army of Hydaspes (9.16-18). They too send an embassy to celebrate the Ethiopian victory (10.24-26). During this time of political upheaval Heliodorus’ fictional narrative details many embassies and intense diplomatic activity in the region.²⁹

²⁸ Epiphanius’ testimony in this passage is confirmed also by Olympiodorus (*fr.* 1.37 = Photius *Bib.* 80.62a9-26 = Eide et al. 1994:§3.309).

²⁹ For this diplomatic activity in *The Ethiopian story*, see Ziethen 1999, who documents these exchanges in detail. Embassies in Heliodorus are also discussed in Hilton 2017b (forthcoming).

The mention of Axumites and Blemmyes in both Heliodorus and Ephiphanius needs to be placed in the context of a well-documented and profound shift in power relations in ancient Nubia following Roman disengagement from the region under the emperor Diocletian in 298.³⁰ Although the Romans had long had an interest in Nubia, Diocletian decided to withdraw his garrison to Philae at this time, relying on goodwill payments to keep the Nobadae and Blemmyes at peace with Rome (Procop. *On the wars* 1.19.27-37).³¹ With the departure of the Roman forces, power passed initially to the kingdom of Meroe and thereafter to that of Axum at some time during the fourth century, probably from about 350 on.³² The last royal pyramids date to 350-360 and at the same time the material culture of the region ceased to be predominantly Meroitic, indicating that power had shifted away from Meroe to the Noba.³³ According to Török 2009:518:

The collapse of urban life, its institutions and social structure at Meroe City is indicated in the last habitation horizon by rural-type dwellings built for large extended families, the abandonment of the temples and squatter occupation within their walls; by burials in ruined palatial buildings and temples; the disappearance of Meroitic industries and the emergence of hand-made pottery wares ... It also seems that the bearers of the new culture were to some extent Meroiticized. Hence, it may be supposed that the decline and collapse of the Meroitic kingdom was, at least partly, brought about not only by the Noba occupation of Meroitic territories and Aksumite incursions, but also by a social, political and cultural imbalance caused by the presence of un-aculturated or superficially acculturated Noba settlers on Meroitic territory. Initially, the Noba immigration may nevertheless have been a centrally controlled process that may be viewed as a Meroitic variant of the settlement of barbarian *foederati* on Roman territories. The resettlement of tribes not an exclusively Roman invention: it

³⁰ The fall of Meroe has attracted considerable scholarship which has continued to grow in recent years. See, for example, Shinnie 1955; Kirwan 1960; Adams 1977:382-390; Török 1988:33-46; Burstein 1995:207-214; Török 2009:515-530. Adams attributes the change to the advent of camels as a mode of transporting goods in this region, which led to the rise of the tribes of the eastern desert and an upsurge of trade.

³¹ See Eide et al. 1994:3.1188-1193 = §328.

³² Shinnie 1967:52 supplies the mid-fourth century date, about which there is an overwhelming consensus. See, for example, also Adams 1977:387; Burstein 1995:207-214 (wrongly placing Heliodorus in the 3rd century, p. 208). Attempts to date the inscription to an Aezanes II in the fifth century by Altheim & Stiehl 1961:234-248 and Altheim & Stiehl 1976:471-479 have been convincingly refuted by Dihle 1964:36-64.

³³ Török 2009:517-518.

was also practiced by the rulers of Aksum as recorded in Ezana's Greek inscription from the mid-fourth century AD.

The inscription referred to by Török above was erected by the Christian King Aezanes (325-375) in Axum. In it he relates how his forces attacked the Noba, who had rebelled against his rule, and laid waste their lands including those of the Kazu (Meroe).³⁴ To celebrate his victory Aezanes erected a throne on which he carved the inscription in Greek, giving the numbers of casualties and prisoners taken in his campaign. The overall situation in this region, however, cannot be neatly reconstructed. Elements of Meroitic culture continued to be produced but the kingdom was fragmented into a number of smaller political units that survived until the early decades of the fifth century.³⁵ There were also incursions by the Blemmyes from the eastern desert. In 337-338, Constantius II appointed a Roman cavalry commander, Flavius Abinnaeus, to take control of the Blemmyes — a responsibility that he fulfilled for three years.³⁶ However, these people continued to cause disturbances and this situation continued well into the Christian era as testified in the *Historia monachorum* and the autobiographies of Pachomius.³⁷

Some decades before these events, the Roman emperor Constantine appears to have attempted to expand his Christian empire from its new base in Constantinople towards the East and the limits of the inhabited world.³⁸ Eusebius mentions contact between India (including Axum and the Blemmyes), and Constantinople on at least three occasions, during which gifts, including precious stones from India, were exchanged (*Life of Constantine* 4.50: 'At about this time [c. 336] ambassadors from the Indians, who inhabit the distant regions of the East, arrived with presents consisting of many varieties of brilliant precious stones, and animals differing in species from those known to us.').³⁹ Contact between India and the court of Constantine is testified to also in the Roman-Kushanian medallion in the British Museum and the expedition of the philosopher Metrodorus to India.⁴⁰ Socrates Scholasticus also writes (*Eccl. Hist.* 1.19) that a Tyrian, Meropius, decided to emulate the voyage of Metrodorus to India and took with him two of his younger relatives, Aedesius and Frumentius. However, the travelers were attacked

³⁴ Shinnie 1967:52-57 provides a translation and discussion. For the text and another translation and commentary see Eide et al. 1994:3.1094-1100.

³⁵ Török 2009:521.

³⁶ Eide et al. 1994:§3.293, 295.

³⁷ See also Eide et al. 1994:§3.314.

³⁸ Palumbo 2016:114 and n. 60.

³⁹ Eide et al. 1994:§3.293

⁴⁰ Warmington 1981; Palumbo 2016:114 nn. 61, 62.

by the Indians and killed, with the exception of the two youths, who were sent to the Indian king as cup-bearer and secretary respectively. These young men were set free on the king's death and his queen asked them to educate her young son until he came of age. Frumentius and Aedesius agreed and devoted themselves to establishing churches and converting the Indians to Christianity. Eventually, Aedesius returned to Tyre and Frumentius to Alexandria, where he reported on his activities to the bishop Athanasius. Sozomen's account (*Eccl. Hist.* 2.24) adds that Frumentius suggested that Athanasius should appoint a bishop to take charge of the Christian community in India and that Athanasius duly appointed him, Frumentius, to this post.⁴¹

These arrangements, however, did not suit Constantine's successor, Constantius II, who deposed Athanasius from the see of Alexandria and sent him into exile because of his heretical views (he was not Arian).⁴² Consequently, Constantius II dispatched a letter to Aezanes, requesting him to return Frumentius to Alexandria for interrogation and instruction in correct Christian belief by Athanasius' Arian replacement, George. The letter is quoted by Athanasius in his *Defence to the emperor Constantius* (31). Constantius also banned the ships of any delegation to the Axumites or Himyarites from docking in Alexandria (*Cod. Theod.* 12.12.2), probably to deter the missionary efforts of Athanasius. Constantius II is also known to have sent Theophilus, an Indian from Ceylon, who had come to the court of Constantine on a previous embassy, to convert the Sabaeans to Christianity. The mission was successful and the Sabaean king built three churches from his own resources. From there, after a trip to his home country of Ceylon, Theophilus visited the Ethiopians (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.6) and, in particular, Axum, where the outcome was unclear.

The correspondence between the diplomatic activity evident in *The Ethiopian story* (as discussed above) and the embassies between Rome and Ethiopia in the reigns of Constantine and Constantius during a period of political change, strengthens an already strong and widely accepted case for reading Heliodorus's novel as a fourth-century text, especially as these exchanges continued under the emperor Julian. Julian's court, as described by Ammianus, was the centre of a world Empire and the goal of many delegations, including some from China, Arabia, and Indian and African Ethiopia.⁴³ As a member of Julian's

⁴¹ See also the account in Rufinus of Aquileia *Hist. Eccl.* 1.9.

⁴² Fernández Gonzalo 1989.

⁴³ Hilton 2017b. For diplomacy in the reign of Julian see also *Amm. Marc.* 22.7.10, 22.9.1; Lonis 1987:235; Snowden 1970:134-135.

circle, Heliodorus would have been well placed to learn indirectly about affairs on the south-eastern fringes of the Roman Empire.

Conclusion

This investigation has gathered a wide range of evidence from the fields of literature, philosophy, religion, history, and archaeology in an attempt to explain the presence of what at first sight appears to be a minor detail in a huge narrative — the dispute over control of emerald mines between the Persians in Egypt and the Ethiopians in *The Ethiopian story* of Heliodorus. In doing so, it has revisited Classical scholarship of the eighteenth century as well as the most recent research relevant to the problem. All this is evidence of the interest that the topic has aroused among very disparate disciplines — an interest that has been sustained over a long period of time. Underlying the questions surrounding the inclusion of Neoplatonic ideas concerning the magical powers of precious stones in the novel are the disturbances in the religious order governing the Roman world arising from the recognition of Christianity as the hegemonic creed of the state by Constantine and his successors. The repercussions of these shifts in the religious order of the Roman Empire were felt far and wide. Regions of the earth previously marginal to the Mediterranean area took on a role of greatly increased importance, reflected in the frequent exchange of embassies between kingdoms on the fringes of the Roman world and its centre in the court of the Roman emperors. This upsurge in diplomatic activity was partly driven by economic matters such as trade but also involved a struggle to win the souls of the multitudinous nations of the *oikoumenē* and even the regions beyond.⁴⁴ The issues involved are complex and the evidence obscure and enigmatic, but nevertheless there is enough in common between the *Περὶ Καταρχῶν* attributed to Maximus the philosopher and spiritual guide of the emperor Julian, the anonymous *Lithica*, and *The Ethiopian story* of Heliodorus to make it probable to conclude that all these texts emanate from the fourth century of our era — a time of widespread change, intense emotion, and anxiety about the future.

⁴⁴ Elm 2012; Simmons 2015.

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