

Chinese Silk in the Roman Empire

Trade with the Roman Empire followed soon, confirmed by the Roman craze for Chinese silk (supplied through the Parthians) from the 1st century BC, even though the Romans thought silk was obtained from trees:

The Seres (Chinese), are famous for the woolen substance obtained from their forests; after a soaking in water they comb off the white down of the leaves... So manifold is the labor employed, and so distant is the region of the globe drawn upon, to enable the Roman maiden to flaunt transparent clothing in public.

-(Pliny the Elder (23- 79, The Natural History)

The Senate issued, in vain, several edicts to prohibit the wearing of silk, on economic and moral grounds: the importation of Chinese silk caused a huge outflow of gold, and silk clothes were considered to be decadent and immoral:

I can see clothes of silk, if materials that do not hide the body, nor even one's decency, can be called clothes... Wretched flocks of maids labour so that the adulteress may be visible through her thin dress, so that her husband has no more acquaintance than any outsider or foreigner with his wife's body.

-(Seneca the Younger (c. 3 BCE- 65 CE, Declamations Vol. I)

The Roman historian Florus also describes the visit of numerous envoys, included Seres (perhaps the Chinese), to the first Roman Emperor Augustus, who reigned between 27 BCE and 14 CE:

Even the rest of the nations of the world which were not subject to the imperial sway were sensible of its grandeur, and looked with reverence to the Roman people, the great conqueror of nations. Thus even Scythians and Sarmatians sent envoys to seek the friendship of Rome. Nay, the Seres came likewise, and the Indians who dwelt beneath the vertical sun, bringing presents of precious stones and pearls and elephants, but thinking all of less moment than the vastness of the journey which they had undertaken, and which they said had occupied four years. In truth it needed but to look at their complexion to see that they were people of another world than ours.

-(*"Cathay and the way thither"*, Henry Yule).

A maritime route opened up between Chinese-controlled Jiaozhi (centred in modern Vietnam, near Hanoi) probably by the 1st century CE. It extended, via ports on the coasts of India and Sri Lanka, all the way to Roman-controlled ports in Egypt and the Nabataean territories on the northeastern coast of the Red Sea. The Hou Hanshu records that a delegation of Roman envoys arrived in China by this maritime route in 166 CE; this may well have been an exaggeration, by the envoys or the scribe, of a party of Roman merchants.

Castaways

Pomponius Mela (Book III, Chapter 5), copied by Pliny the Elder, wrote that Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer, proconsul in Gaul, 59 BCE, got 'several Indians' (Indi) as a present from a Germanic king. The Indians were driven by a storm to the coasts of Germania (in tempestatem ex Indicis aequoribus):

Metellus Celer recalls the following: when he was Proconsul in Gaul, he was given people from India by the king of the {Sueves}; upon requesting why they were in this land, he learnt that they were caught in a storm away from India, that they became castaways, and finally landed on the coasts of Germany. They thus resisted the sea, but suffered from the cold for the rest of their travel, and that is the reason why they left. -(Sueves is an emendation to the text.)

It is unclear whether these castaways were people from India or Eastern Asia, since "Indians" designated all Asians, Indian and beyond, during Roman times. Pomponius is using these Indi as evidence for the Northeast Passage and the northward strait out of the Caspian Sea (which in Antiquity was usually thought to be open to Oceanus in the north). Edward Herbert Bunbury suggests that they were Finns. There are also some speculations that they may have been American Indians castaway across the Atlantic. Some confusion may be suspected in this passage since Metellus Celer died before taking up his proconsul-ship, thus leaving it free for Julius Caesar.

Roman Soldiers in the East

There are several known instances of Roman soldiers being captured by the Parthians and transferred to the East for border duty. According to Pliny, in 54 BCE, after losing at the battle of Carrhae, 10,000 Roman prisoners were displaced by the Parthians to Margiana to man the frontier (Plin. Hist. Nat. 6. 18).

The Chinese have kept an account (by Bau Gau) that some of these soldiers were enlisted by the Hun chief Jzh Jzh against the Chinese Han Dynasty. Some of them were blond with blue eyes, and fought in "fish-scale formation" (possibly the Roman testudo formation). These men were captured by the Chinese and were able to found the city Liqian (Li-chien), the Chinese transliteration of "Alexandria", in the Gansu region of western China.¹

A Roman inscription of the 2nd-3rd centuries CE has been found in eastern Uzbekistan in the Kara-Kamar cave complex, which has been analyzed as belonging to some Roman soldiers from the Pannonian Legio XV Apollinaris²:

The Expedition of Ban Chao

In 97, the Chinese general Ban Chao crossed the Tian Shan and Pamir mountains with an army of 70,000 men in a campaign against the Xiongnu. He went as far west as the Caspian Sea and the region of Ukraine, reaching the territory of Parthia, upon which event he reportedly also sent an envoy named Gan Ying to Daqin (Rome). Gan Ying left a detailed account of western countries, although he only reached as far as Mesopotamia. He intended to sail to Rome through the Black Sea, but some Parthian merchants, interested in maintaining their profitable role as the middleman in trade

between Rome and China, told him the trip would take two years at least (when it was actually closer to two months). Deterred, he returned home.

Gan Ying left an account on Rome (Daqin in Chinese) which may have relied on second-hand sources. He locates it to the west of the sea:

Its territory is covers several thousand li [a li is around half a kilometer], it has over 400 walled cities. Several tens of small states are subject to it. The outer walls of the cities are made of stones. They have established posting stations... There are pines and cypresses.

-(Hou Hanshu, cited in Leslie and Gardiner).

He also describes the adoptive monarchy of the Emperor Nerva, and Roman physical appearance and products:

As for the king, he is not a permanent figure but is chosen as the man most worthy... The people in this country are tall and regularly featured. They resemble the Chinese, and that is why the country is called Da Qin (The "Great" Qin)... The soil produced lots of gold, silver and rare jewels, including the jewel which shines at night.. they sew embroidered tissues with gold threads to form tapestries and damask of many colors, and make a gold-painted cloth, and a "cloth washed-in-the-fire" (asbestos).

-(Hou Hanshu, cited in Leslie and Gardiner).

Finally Gan Ying determines Rome correctly as the main economic power at the western end of Eurasia:

It is from this country that all the various marvelous and rare objects of foreign states come.

-(Hou Hanshu, cited in Leslie and Gardiner).

The Chinese army made an alliance with the Parthians and established some forts at a distance of a few days march from the Parthian capital Ctesiphon and held the region for several years. In 116, after the conquest of Dacia's gold and silver mines in year 106, the Roman Emperor Trajan advanced into Parthia to Ctesiphon and came within one day's march of the Chinese border garrisons, but direct contacts never took place.

First Roman Embassy

With the expansion of the Roman Empire in the Middle-East during the 2nd century, the Romans gained the capability to develop shipping and trade in the Indian Ocean. Several ports have been excavated on the coast of India which contain Roman remains. Several Romans probably traveled farther to the East, either on Roman, Indian or Chinese ships. The first group of people claiming to be an embassy of Romans to China is recorded in 166, sixty years after the expeditions to the west of the Chinese general Ban Chao. It came to Emperor Huan of Han China, "from Antun (Emperor Antoninus Pius), king of Daqin (Rome)". Although, as Antoninus Pius died in 161, while the convoy arrived in 166, if genuine, it may have been from Marcus Aurelius, who was emperor in

166. The confusion arises because Marcus Aurelius was formally adopted by his predecessor and took his names as additional names.

The mission came from the South, and therefore probably by sea, entering China by the frontier of Jinan or Tonkin. It brought presents of rhinoceros horns, ivory, and tortoise shell, which had probably been acquired in Southern Asia. About the same time, and possibly through this embassy, the Chinese acquired a treatise of astronomy from Daqin (Chinese name of the Roman Empire).

The existence of China was clearly known to Roman cartographers of the time, since its name and position is depicted in Ptolemy's *Geographia*, which is dated to c. 150. It is located beyond the Aurea Chersonesus ("Golden Peninsula"), which refers to the Southeast Asian peninsula. It is shown as being on the Magnus Sinus ("Great Gulf"), which presumably corresponds to the known areas of the China Sea at the time; although Ptolemy represents it as tending south-east rather than north-east. Trade throughout the Indian Ocean was extensive from the 2nd century, and many trading ports have been identified in India and Sri Lanka with Roman communities, through which the Roman embassy passed.

Other Roman Embassies

Other embassies may have been sent after this first encounter, but were not recorded, until an account appears about presents sent in the early 3rd century by the Roman Emperor to the Emperor Taitsu of the Kingdom of Wei (reigned 227- 239) in Northern China. The presents consisted of articles of glass in a variety of colors. While several Roman Emperors ruled during this time, the embassy, if genuine, may have been sent by Alexander Severus; since his successors reigned briefly and were busy with civil wars.

Another embassy from Daqin is recorded in the year 284, as bringing "tribute" to the Chinese empire. This embassy presumably was sent by the Emperor Carus (282- 283), whose short reign was occupied with war with Persia.

Notes

1- Account of Liqian

2- Reference: Ustinova, Yulia, "New Latin and Greek Rock-Inscriptions from Uzbekistan," *Hephaistos: New Approaches in Classical Archaeology and related Fields*, 18/2000, pp. 169-179. Through Roman inscriptions in Uzbekistan
