

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
