China and the Roman Empire: Archeological testimonials

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Abstract

During the academic year 2017-2018, the Unité d’archéologie classique and the Institut Confucius at the University of Geneva organized a series of exchanges in the field of archeology. This short contribution presents some of the preliminary observations regarding early contacts between the Roman Empire and the Far East during the First and the Second centuries AD. (Posted on Sunday January 13th, 2019).

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During the academic year 2017-2018, the Unité d’archéologie classique and the Institut Confucius at the University of Geneva organized a series of exchanges in the field of archeology. This short contribution presents some of the preliminary observations of Prof. Lorenz Baumer regarding early contacts between the Roman Empire and the Far East during the First and the Second centuries AD.

Relations between China and the Roman Empire during the first and second centuries AD have recently been the subject of growing interest (see e.g. McLaughlin 2016; Lieu & Mikkelsen 2016; Graf 2018 and Galli 2017 for a historiographical abstract). A few historical studies analyze from a comparative perspective the structures and the functioning of the two empires that existed more or less in parallel, the Empire of the Han on the one hand, and the Roman Empire on the other (Olson 1979; Mittag & Mutschler 2008; Scheidel 2009; Scheidel 2014). At the same time, material remains from the Mediterranean testifying to contacts between the Romans and China are so far exclusively limited to woven silk discovered mainly in the Syrian desert city of Palmyra and in Dura Europos on the Euphrates, whereas similar findings in other regions of the Roman Empire are quite rare, because of the generally humid climate, which prevents the preservation of textiles. But what about the materials that traveled in the other direction, from the West to the East? This paper intends to give an overview of the state of the research concerning this particular question from an archeological perspective, based mainly on literary sources in Western languages.

While one can find only little information about China in ancient Latin or Greek literature, some Chinese texts, first of all, the Weilue and the Hou Hanshu, report some direct contacts between the Romans and the Chinese world (see below). They testify at the same time to the essential role of the
Parthians who tried to control and, if possible, to eliminate quite successfully these direct exchanges, obviously out of economic interests. Meanwhile, archeological findings allow us to draw a complementary picture, showing that even if direct contacts were understandably rare, there are a few surviving archeological remains that can lead to a somewhat better knowledge of the types of exchanged goods and of the rules of the exchange between the Mediterranean and the Far East in Antiquity.

Hellenistic Imports

In theory, the chances for the direct exchange of goods between the Mediterranean and the Far East should have been better during the second half of the fourth and in the third century BC. This is due to the enormous expansion of the Macedonian kingdom during the reign of Alexander the Great (336-323 BC), who extended Greek influence far into Bactria and, in the South, down to the Indus Valley. After Alexanders’ death in Babylon, the Macedonian kingdom fell rather quickly apart into several separate kingdoms, the Eastern regions being essentially ruled by Seleucus I Nikator (312-281 BC) and his successors. From the beginning of the second century BC, Rome began its conquest of the Macedonian kingdoms in the West (Greece, Asia Minor and Egypt), while the Eastern territories were overruled by the growing empires of the Kushans, Sogdians, Parthians, and later of the Scythians (see e.g. McLaughlin 2010; Manning 2014; McLaughlin 2016, Bopearachchi 2017 with bibliographies).

Meanwhile, only very scanty archeological remains testify to this early period of contact between the Hellenistic kingdoms and the Far East. This is illustrated by a group of six silver bowls and a handful of similar bowls cast in bronze that have been found at different sites in China, mainly in royal tombs of the Western Han Dynasty (see Li 2014 for a complete list). Two particularly well-preserved examples are a silver bowl discovered in 2010 in the tomb No. 1 in Dayunshan (Jiangsu Province) (Nickel 2012; Li 2014, 65 fig. 1; Zhixin 2017, 172-173 No. 94 with fig.) and another one discovered in 1979 in the Province of Shandong (Li 2014, 63 No. 1 fig. 1). While some researchers believe that we are dealing with imported objects from Hellenistic Persia that have been locally adapted by Chinese artisans, Lukas Nickel has convincingly argued on the basis of their technical particularities that they are to be considered as local products, but clearly inspired by Western models (see also the findings from Niya: Zhixin 2017, 72 with fig. 67; Graf 2018, 470-471). The same seems to be true for a glass bowl found in Hengzhigang in South China (now in the National Museum of China in Beijing), that has often been considered as being imported from the Levant in the Late Hellenistic or the Early Roman Imperial period, but is most probably of local production (Watt 2004, 58 fig. 46; Whitfield 2009 cat. 48; Borell 2010, 134-135 tab. 2 and p. 136 fig. 11,1; Hoppal 2015a, pl. 4; Whitfield 2018, 73-92 pl. 1b; for early Western Han glass see Borell 2016, 57-65).

A somewhat clearer picture is presented by some findings of the Late Hellenistic period in the Northwestern regions, more precisely in the province of Xinjiang. A particular discovery is a fragmented wall hanging discovered in 1983-1984 in the Sampula cemetery, showing a centaur blowing a war-trumpet, and the nearly life-size representation of a noble warrior with strong Macedonian influence (Watt 2004, 194-195 No. 101 with fig.; Wagner et al. 2009). The origin of the piece manufactured in the Third or the Second Century BC is not clearly identified, but might have been the palace of Aï Khanoum in Afghanistan, that was raid at about 145 BC by nomads. The tapestry was later worked into a pair of trousers that ended up, probably in the First Century BC, in a tomb.
An interesting bronze figurine was discovered in 1983 in Xinyuan in the northwestern part of the province of Xinjiang (Zhixin 2017, 103 No. 26 with fig.). Measuring about 40 cm, it depicts a warrior kneeling on bent leg, wearing a short apron and a helmet of Phrygian or, more probably, of Macedonian tradition. The locally worked statuette of the Fourth or the Third Century BC is a clear testimony of knowledge of Western armor in this region.

It seems useful to mention briefly in this same context some of the Western imports that have been found in Mongolia, and that possibly go back to the late Hellenistic or the Early Roman Imperial period. One can mention in the first place an exceptionally fine bowl measuring only 7.5 cm in diameter and made of blue ripped glass with a white decoration (Erdenebaatar et al. 2011; Whitfield 2018, 48). This bowl was discovered in the necropolis of Gol mod II at Undur-Ulaan in the Arkhangai province, while a silver medallion of undoubtedly Hellenistic origin, showing Dionysus dancing with a maenad, was excavated in the necropolis of Noyon Uul in the Tuv Province (Eregzen 2011, 128-129 No. 162 with fig.; Whitfield 2018, 48). These two examples illustrate how far objects were able to travel during this early period, even if we do not know the reason for it.

That Western forms were at least partially known during this early period is documented by a few objects worked in jade imitating vessels in other materials, like e.g. a stern-cup carved in white nephrite with a green hue and dated to 221-206 BC (Zhixin 2017, 104 No. 27 with fig.). The shape of the cup excavated in 1976 in Chezhang, Xian (Shaanxi Province) is modelled after a glass goblet of Mediterranean type, whereas the decoration of the exterior follows the tradition of the Warring States period. Some Western influence has also been proposed for some of the terracotta statues from the Mausoleum complex of Qin Shihuangdi (210 BC) at Lingtong, where some of the figures show an interest in anatomical details that implies an awareness of Greco-Roman sculpture (Barnhart 2004; Nickel 2006/7; Nickel 2013; Zhixin 2017, 76. 101 No. 24 with fig.).

That some first-hand knowledge, first of all, about Parthia, was available in this early phase, is documented by the report that the envoy Zhang Qian delivered to the Emperor Hanwu Di (141-87 BC), containing amongst other information a description of Parthian silver coins: “The coins of Parthia are made of silver. The face of the king appears on the coin. As soon as one king dies, the coins are changed, on which appears the new face of his successor” (see the translation and commentary by Juping 2014-2015, p. 125). This report might be completed by a series of 274 small lead disks of about 5.5 cm in diameter, discovered in 1976 at Lingtai, and showing on the slightly convex side a dragon motif, while on the concave side a circular inscription in fantasy letters is an imitation of a Greek inscription (Zhixin 2017, 194 cat. 109 with fig.). Similar pieces are known in much smaller quantity at a few other sites (Zhixin 2017, 194 cat. 109 n. 1). In the New York exhibition catalogue, the lead disks are compared with bronze coins of the Han dynasty, carrying a blundered rendering of the Parthian coin legend (in Greek) “ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ” (“King of Kings Arsaces, the glorious, admirer of Greece”), that are dated to the second century AD. But the same legend is already used on Parthian coins under king Mithridates II (c. 123-88 B.C.) (http://www.parthia.com/mithradates2.htm). It seems at least possible that the Chinese bronze coins date already from the end of the second or from the beginning of the first century BC, and might therefore be of the same period as Zhang Qian’s report. Even if this does not give a secure date for the lead disks, the creation of the latter under the Western Han dynasty in the late second century BC cannot be excluded.

To sum up, and with the exception of the tapestry from the Sampula cemetery that has to be
considered as plunder, archaeology has so far provided only very scant and indirect proof for imports of Western objects into China during the Hellenistic period. But future research in the field and in the local archeological museums will most probably help to complete this picture.

**Literary Testimonials for Direct Contacts During the Roman Imperial Period**

The literary texts that speak of direct contacts between the Roman Empire and China have been discussed already several times (e.g. Ferguson & Keynes 1978; Leslie & Gardiner 2006; Hill 2009; McLaughlin 2010; Hoppál 2011; Christopoulos 2012; Yu 2013; McLaughlin 2016, 66-73. 189-198; Sánchez Hernández 2016; Xinru 2016), so that only some examples will be mentioned in what follows. That the Han emperor had some knowledge of the Romans is documented e.g. in the Hou Hanshu: “The people of Da Qin are all tall and honest. They are very like the people of China and that is why this state is called Da Qin” (Hou Hanshu, 88,11; translation McLaughlin 2010, 123 and Hill 2009, 25). This corresponds to the description in the Weilue: “The common people are tall and virtuous like the Chinese, but they wear Western clothes” (Weilue, 11; translation McLaughlin 2010, 123 and Hill 2009, 255). While the descriptions of Rome, its political structures, and of the geography of the Empire are based mainly on secondhand information, the texts give some insight into the – very limited – knowledge of the material culture, most probably based on the objects that made their way to the Emperor’s court: “Da Qin (the Roman Empire) produces plenty of gold, silver, and precious jewels, luminous jade, ‘bright moon’ pearls, fighting cocks, rhinoceros horn, coral, yellow amber, opaque glass, whitish chalcedony, red cinnabar, green gemstones, decorated gold-threaded and multicolored embroideries, woven gold-threaded net, delicate polychrome silks painted with gold, and asbestos cloth” (Hou Hanshu, 88,12, translation McLaughlin 2010, 107; see also Hill 2009, 25). At the same time, as has already been mentioned, the Parthians tried to block any direct exchange, this out of their own economic interests: “The Rulers of Rome have always wanted to send embassies to China. But the Parthians have prevented all contact because they want to trade Chinese silks with the Roman Empire” (Hou Hanshu, 88,12, translation McLaughlin 2010, 107; see also Hill 2009, 27). They had good reason, as the Hou Hanshu states: “The Romans trade with Anxi (Parthia) and Tianzhu (northwest India) by sea. The return gain is ten to one” (Hou Hanshu, 88,12, translation McLaughlin 2010, 161; see also Hill 2009, 25).

For this reason, it is not astonishing that literary testimonials to the presence of Greek or Roman people in China are extremely rare (Bueno 2016). At least one possible direct contact is documented by a Greek text of the Roman Imperial period: according to Ptolemy (Ptol., Geog., 1.11), a Macedonian merchant named Mahes Titianus sent in the First Century AD his agents to trade with a commercial station near the Pamirs, called the Stone Tower (Heil & Schulz 2015; Andrade 2015). But when they reached their destination, they encountered the ‘Silk People’ or ‘Seres’ who are probably to be identified as Chinese, and who took the agents with them. According to Ptolemy (Ptol., Geog., 1.11.4; 1.12.1), the journey from the ‘Stone Tower’ to ‘Sera’ took seven months, but it is disputed whether it ended at the residence of the Han emperor or in some other place (Heil & Schulz 2015 n. 6 with bibliography). Another disputed question is whether Mahes Titianus’s trade agents are to be identified with a mission mentioned by the Hou Hanshu for November 100 AD: “In winter two states from the Western regions named Meng-chi Tou-le sent envoys to submit tribute. They brought silks and the gold seal of their king” (Hou Hanshu, 4; translation McLaughlin 2010, 127; see also Hill 2009, 131). The hypothetical identification of the ‘two states’ as the Chinese transliteration of the rather small Roman province of Macedonia in Northern Greece is hardly convincing, what it is further confirmed by their second mention in the Hou Hanshu: “The distant states of Meng-chi Tou-le both
came to make their submission by sending envoys to bring tribute” (Hou Hanshu, 88,1; translations McLaughlin 2010, 126; see also Hill 2009, 5; see on this problem e.g. Hill 2009, 129-131 and Heil & Schulz 2015 n. 58). But at least, trade with China seems to be considered important enough for the journey to have been recorded and finally repeated by Ptolemy.

A similar episode may lie behind the so-called ‘Antun’-Embassy, reported again by the Hou Hanshou: “The Ruler of the Roman Empire, ‘Antun’, sent envoys from beyond the frontiers to reach us through Rinan. They offered elephant tusks, rhinoceros horn, and turtle shell [as diplomatic gifts]. This was the very first time there was [direct] communication [between our two countries]. The tribute they brought was neither precious nor rare, raising suspicion that the accounts [of Rome given by earlier informants] might be exaggerated.” (Hou Hanshou, 88,12; translation McLaughlin 2010, 134; see also Hill 2009, 27). ‘Antun’ is generally interpreted as the Chinese phonetic transcription of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus who ruled from 161 to 180 AD. As has already been proposed by other researchers, the so-called ‘envoys’ were most probably Roman merchants brought to the Emperor. As merchants preferred to present themselves as official envoys, they simply handed him over the goods they had with them as official gifts – to the obvious disappointment of the Emperor. This interpretation finds further confirmation in two other Chinese texts: “In this year [184/5 AD] Da Qin presented 30 000 rolls of honey fragrance paper” (Nan-fang Tsao-mu Chuang, 9, translation McLaughlin 2010, 139); and: “In this year, [276-282 AD] Da Qin came to offer tribute and it passed through the Guangxi Circuit. Of the many treasures they offered the strangest was ‘fire-washed cloth’ (asbestos)” (I-wen Lei-chu, 76 [276-282 AD.], translation McLaughlin 2010, 139). While the ‘honey fragrance paper’ was produced most probably in South Asia (McLaughlin 2010, 139), the fireproof textiles that are also mentioned in the Hou Hanshu (88,12), are clearly of Mediterranean origin, as is confirmed by Strabo, *Geography* 10.1.6: “In Carystus is also produced the stone which is combed and woven, so that the woven material is made into towels, and, when these are soiled, they are thrown into fire and cleansed, just as linens are cleansed by washing” (see also e.g. Pedanii Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica* V.138). These textiles look like an ideal gift to impress the Emperor and to obtain the necessary permits for trading, as they were light and therefore simple to transport over a long distance.

Another visit of a Roman merchant named ‘Lun’ (what is probably a transliteration of the Greek name Leon) is recorded by the Liang-shu for 226 AD: “A merchant of Da Qin whose name was Lun came to Tongkin. The prefect of Tongkin named Wu Miao sent him to Sun Quan. The Emperor asked him for details about his native land and its customs. Qin Lun prepared a report in reply.” (Yao Siliun, Liang-shu, 34, translation McLaughlin 2010, 136). The Southern sea route passing by Vietnam that had probably also been used by the Roman merchants in 184/5 AD (see above), had gained in importance, as is confirmed by the same author for the sixth century AD: “Merchants of Rome often visit Fu-nan (Cambodia), Jih-nan and Chiao-chih (Vietnam), but few people from these regions have been to Rome.” (Yao Siliun, Liang-shu, 54 (6th century AD, translation McLaughlin 2010, 137; see also Hill 2009, 292).

There is so far no written confirmation for Chinese envoys or merchants having made it in person to the Mediterranean (for possible DNA identifications of East Asian people in Roman archeological contexts, see e.g. Prowse et al. 2010; Redfern 2016): In 97 A.D., the protector-general Ban Chao sent a man called Gan Ying in the direction of the Roman Empire, but when he reached the Indian Ocean, he did not travel any further as “There is something in this sea which makes a person long for home and many men have lost their lives on it, for a man may surely die from homesickness. Appreciating all this, Gan Ying did not go any further” (Hou Hanshu, 88,10, translation McLaughlin 2010, 125; see
also Hill 2009, 23; see also Hou Hanshu 88,1). More than a century later, when the Macedonian merchant Leon (see above) was travelling back to the West in 226 AD, “Sun Quan […] sent an officer named Liu Hsien of Huiji District to accompany Qin Lun [on his return]. Da Qin Lun returned directly to his native land but Liu Hsien died on the way” (Yao Siliun, Liang-shu, 48, translation McLaughlin 2010, 137). It is not known if Leon himself reached ever his home, as he is not mentioned in any Latin or Greek text or inscription.

**Roman Imports**

The written sources permit only a very general picture of the imports from the Mediterranean in China, one that can be filled out with the archeological findings of the Early Roman Imperial period (First and Second century AD), first of all, with some imported glassware (Fuxi 2009, 88-97; Borell 2010; Hoppál 2015a; Hoppál 2015b; Hoppál 2016; Borell 2016). A quite spectacular finding is a group of shards of a mosaic vessel, found in Tomb 2 of the Ganquanshang necropolis in Hanjiang (Jiangsu) that is dated to 67 AD (Fuxi 2009, 89; Borell 2010, 127-128 fig. 1; Watts 2014, 58 fig. 47; Hoppál 2015a, 344 cat. I.1.9 pl. 5; Hoppál 2016, 100-101. 112 cat. I.1 fig. 9; Borell 2016, 45-47). Another example of early importation is a monochrome cup made of transparent blue glass that was discovered in this region at Laohudun in a tomb of the same period and interpreted as a burial of a high official (Hoppál 2015a, 245 cat. I.1.10; Hoppál 2016, 100-101. 112 cat. I.2 fig. 10; Borell 2016, 47-48 fig. 3.1). According to the chemical composition of these vessels both of them are unquestionably Roman finds.

These rare examples of early imported glassware are completed by a glass bottle excavated in 1987 in an Eastern Han tomb in Luoyang (Henan Province) (Watt 2004, 113 cat. 13 with fig.). The form of the bottle is distinct from traditional Chinese glassware, and the fact that it was manufactured by glassblowing speaks in favour of its identification as an import from the Mediterranean during the first three centuries of our era. Finally, an intact faceted glass bowl has been found in tomb No. 6 of the Xianheguan necropolis, located in the Eastern suburb of Nanjing (Hoppál 2016, 105 fig. 7. 114 cat. II.6). Following Krisztina Hoppál, it finds a close analogy in a glass bowl from Karanis in Roman Egypt, dating to the second half of the second century AD. It might therefore belong to the small group of early Roman glass imports.

The importation of glasses from the West became more important only during the Fourth and Fifth centuries AD (see Borell 2016, 50-56 with an overview), but not all of them need to be Roman, as is shown by a glass cup unearthed in the tomb No. 7 tomb at Xiangshan, Nanjing (Fuxi 2009, 89 with fig. 2.27; see also Hoppál 2015a 351-352 cat. II.4. pl. 1; Hoppál 2016, 104 fig. 4 and Appendix 113 cat. II.4.1 fig 12): From its form and decoration, it is in fact Sassanian rather than Roman. As Brigitte Borell points out, the early finds could have reached China via the overland routes of the Silk Road, while the later glass vessels, “found in tombs of the Eastern Han period in the area of Yangzhou came along the maritime routes” (Borell 2016, 66).

If early imports of Roman glass are still rare in China, Roman coins of this same period seem to be literally absent until the end of the fourth century AD (Li 2015). Of one hundred documented Roman coins of the fifth to the eighth centuries AD that have been found since the end of the 19th century, a concentration along the steppe and the land routes in Northern China can be noticed, as well as a clear preference for gold coins, often used as ornaments in a funeral context.
Also, other Western objects worked in precious metal are until today exceptionally rare in China. An example is provided by a gilt silver plate of 31 cm in diameter been found in 1988 at Beitan, close to Jingyuan (Gansu Province) (Watt 2004, 184-185 No. 90 with fig.; Hoppál 2015b pl. 57; Hoppál 2015b, 291 fig. 6 left). The central medallion is decorated with the typical representation of Dionysus riding on his panther, while its border is filled with the busts of the twelve Olympian gods. The rest of the inner side of the plate is richly decorated with grapevines and different kinds of small animals. The plate carries two engraved inscriptions, one of them Sogdian and dating from the fifth to the seventh century AD, while the second inscription is giving the weight of the silver plate in (probably) Bactrian drachmas, and engraved not later than in the early sixth century. The plate, manufactured during the Roman Imperial period, made a very long journey lasting several centuries before it finally arrived, not before the seventh century AD, in China. Until today, imports of silver vessels and similar objects of the First and Second centuries AD seem to be missing, this as well as objects in gold, fireproof textiles, Western clothes (with the exception of the Sampula tapestry), ceramics, arms, jewels or any other light objects that might have been brought to China by the caravans and ships in exchange for Chinese silk. One can only hope that this short list can be completed in the future. A consequent research and mapping of all the imported objects will contribute to a better understanding of the different routes, of the intermediate places of exchange, and of the functioning of this global market at its very origins.

A Short Look at Silk

It seems useful to complete this review with a short look in another direction, as the bibliography about silk is rapidly growing (Hildebrandt & Gillis 2016a; Hildebrandt & Gillis 2016B). The following remarks are concentrating for this reason only on some examples that have been discovered in the Syrian Desert city of Palmyra, and that can contribute to the general theme of this contribution (Schmidt-Colinet 2000a; Schmidt-Colinet 2000b; al-As’ad et al. 2005; Stauffer 2005; Schmidt-Colinet 2014; Thomas 2016; Graf 2018, 481-496). The caravan city, which has been badly damaged during the civil war of the last years, has delivered an impressive set of Chinese silk of the Han period. One of the earliest examples is a small piece of greenish silk with woven masks of the first half of the first century BC that has been found in the Tomb of Atenatan (Schmidt-Colinet 2000a, 107 no. 15 fig. 65 pl. 81a-b; Stauffer 2005, 76 fig. 121a-b and p. 80), while other fragments are showing representations of dragons and other fantastic animals as well as Chinese letters (Falkenhausen 2000; Stauffer 2005, 76-79 fig. 122-127). The letters are given in the form of the imperial writing offices, indicating that the silk has been worked in the official Imperial workshops (Falkenhausen 2000; Stauffer 2005, 80-81). They might have come to Palmyra as official gifts or as a tribute, as one cannot expect that the Palmyreans were able to read these texts.
A particular piece of silk has been discovered in tomb 65 (Schmidt-Colinet 2000a, 145-146 no. 240 fig. 52. 105 pl. 2a. 13e. 96-97 color plate IIIg; Stauffer 2005, 80-81 fig. 128-129) (fig. 1). The bi-chrome textile is worked in Chinese technique, but shows Western iconography with figures holding grapes that might represent Eros or, because of the lyre on his feet, even Dionysus-Bacchus, the god of wine. On his right is shown an animal that has been interpreted as a goat, but that is most probably to be seen as a camel because of the two humps on its back. This detail is particularly interesting, as the Palmyreans did not keep camels, but dromedaries (with only one hump), as it is well known from many representations on funeral reliefs, whereas camels were used by the caravans crossing Inner Asia. The silk from tomb 65 present a very interesting mixture of Western and Far East traditions, confirming that the workman was aware of both of them, and wove this particular piece of silk with his best knowledge and specifically for the Western market.

Cette contribution a été relue par Lia Wei


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