

Did the Romans have links with the Far East?

ROME AND CHINA

Writers and scholars have periodically flirted with the idea of historic links between Rome and China. There is no denying the obvious parallels between the two great empires, each run by a bureaucratic civil service and served by a professional army, poised to defend long frontiers against the barbarians beyond. However, there has been a tendency to assume that two empires of such sophistication must have maintained communications between themselves. So, is it likely that the Romans had links with the Far East?

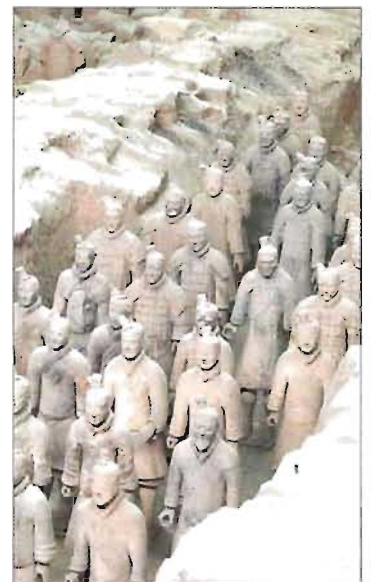
By Duncan B. Campbell

In 1866, Sir Henry Yule, late of the East India Company, published his *Cathay and the Way Thither* in two volumes, the first of which comprised an essay on the relations between China and the West prior to the medieval period, supported by extensive source material in translation. Greek and Roman writers' knowledge of the Far East, he concluded, was understandably vague, given the remoteness of China from the Mediterranean, and he warned against those scholars who "have attached as much precision to the expressions of *partial knowledge* hovering on the verge of ignorance, as if these had been the expressions of *precise but fragmentary knowledge*, such as our geographers possess of the Antarctic Coasts".

Finding a similar vagueness in the Chinese accounts of the west, Yule perceptively drew a distinction between 'partial knowledge' – the kind of third-hand rumour that may be based on a kernel of fact but whose substance has been embroidered with fantastic and sensational additions – and 'precise but fragmentary knowledge' – the kind of knowledge that most of us nowadays

may profess about the moon, for example. It is worth bearing this distinction in mind when assessing the degree of geographical familiarity of both parties.

One recent book on ancient geography claims that "the Romans reached as far as China, establishing contacts with the local people" (D. Dueck, *Geography in Classical Antiquity*). Another, aimed at college students, assures its readers that "both primary textual sources and physical evidence hint at direct commercial exchanges [between China and Rome] as early as the first century BC" (J.M. Moore & R.W. Wendenken, *Teaching the Silk Road*). Similarly, the suggestion, in a serious work of Roman archaeology, that "Hadrian may have been influenced by travellers' accounts of the Great Wall of China" (D.J. Breeze & B. Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall*), implies routine contact between the two empires. On the other hand, another popular book fudges the issue by conceding that both cultures were only "dimly aware of the other's existence" (A. Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*). So should we believe in direct contact or dim awareness? And does this dim awareness constitute Yule's 'partial knowledge', or is it supposed to imply 'precise but fragmentary knowledge'? Exactly how much did Rome and China know about each other?



Chinese warriors of the so-called 'terracotta army', dating from 210 BC during the Qin Dynasty.

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Roman geographers

The real difficulty in an exercise such as Yule's lies in the fact that neither culture utilized the same geographical and ethnographical terminology. We simply do not know, with any degree of certainty, what the Romans called the region now known as China. It is generally supposed that the anonymous first-century Greek author of the *Voyage Around the Erythraean Sea* was referring to China, after his itinerary reached the mouth of the River Ganges, when he writes that "the outer sea ends in a land called Thin, in which there is a large inland city called Thinai". Similarly, when Ptolemy, author of the second-century *Geography*, writes of "the eastern peoples of Great Asia, the Sinai and those in Serika", whom he also locates beyond the River Ganges, they are assumed to be the Chinese.

Scholars have suggested that these names preserve some memory of the Ch'in dynasty (often nowadays spelled Qin), which ruled the area in the later third century BC, on the grounds of phonetic similarity. Such a theory would imply genuine (if limited) knowledge of the country. But Ptolemy is the only writer to use the form 'Sinai'. Other writers (even including Ptolemy himself) refer to a people called the Seres, from the Greek word for silk. Modern authorities routinely assume that these Seres (or 'silk people') were the ancient Chinese, but it need hardly be stated that this is pure conjecture. (Pliny, for one, says that they were tall, with golden hair and blue eyes!)

On the other hand, the Romans were, of course, well acquainted with India. By sea, merchants plied their trade along the coast of the Erythraean Sea, which in ancient times encompassed the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the northern waters of the Indian Ocean. By land, Alexander the Great had forged a route via Ecbatana, through the true Caspian Gates, to Antiocheia Margiana (Merv), from where any travellers who did not proceed east through Bactria, heading for Maracanda (Samarkand) or Bactra (Balkh), could turn

south to Alexandropolis (Kandahar) and cross into India by the Bolan Pass. However, knowledge of the Caspian Gates was soon lost and it is debateable whether any Roman ever followed this path (see 'Who built Alexander's Wall?' in *Ancient Warfare* VII.6, pp. 47–51).

Greek and Roman writers appear to have assumed that, in the East, the land mass ended at India, and the River Ganges poured out eastwards into the encircling sea. Thus, Alexander the Great (who, in reality, had only reached the Indus River in the Punjab) could be said to have stood at the far side of the world. Strabo, writing at the end of the first century BC, preserves a rumour that, contrary to all other reports, Alexander had actually reached the Ganges, and that his general Craterus "saw the river and the sea-monsters in it". The same basic geographical error is found in Pomponius Mela's *On the Structure of the World*, in which he claims that "the first peoples we encounter in the East are the Indians, the Seres and the Scythians. The Seres inhabit roughly the middle part of the East, with the Indians and Scythians on the extremities, both occupying broad swathes, and spreading, not only in this place, to the ocean". From these hazy reports, it is plain that no Roman geographer had any more than the vaguest notion of the Far East – in Yule's terminology, 'partial knowledge'.

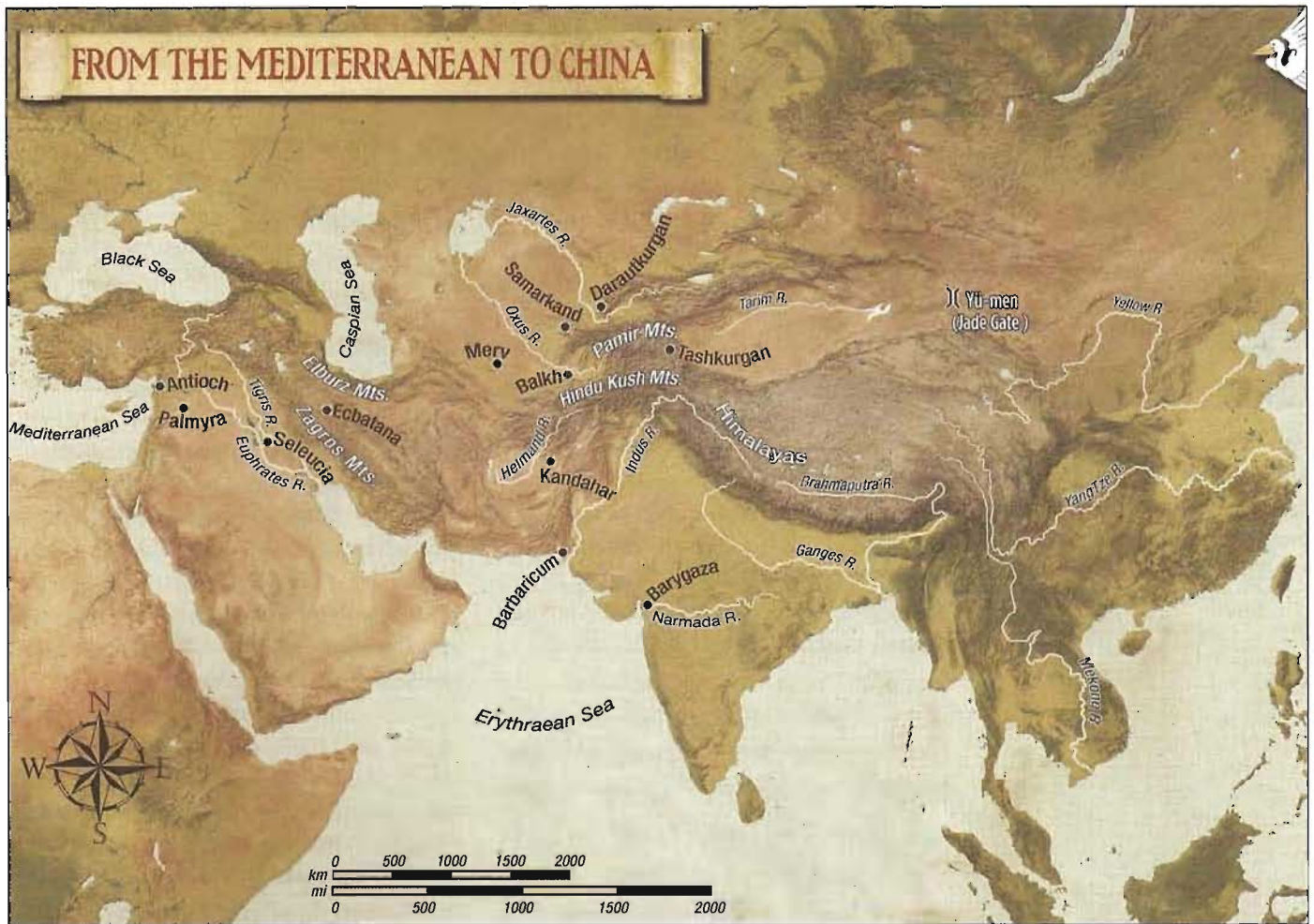
Chinese annals

The ancient Chinese texts are even more problematic, owing to scholarly disagreement over the meaning (and even the pronunciation) of the relevant place-names. Foremost amongst these is Ta-ts'in or Ta Ch'in (often nowadays spelled Da Qin), which literally means 'Great China', and its capital city of An-tu, or 'City of Peace'. Yule believed that Tathsin (as he spelled it) referred, broadly speaking, to the Roman Empire, and that its capital city of An-tu was "Antioch, probably", because it sounded similar. The German sinologist



Terracotta figurine, Eastern Han. Dated to the third century AD, it depicts a foreign soldier. Musée Guimet, Paris.

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Friedrich Hirth refined this view, asserting (in his work of 1885, *China and the Roman Orient*) that “Ta-ts’in was not the Roman Empire with Rome as its capital, but merely its oriental part, viz., Syria, Egypt and Asia Minor; and Syria in the first instance”.

However, twentieth-century sinologists have noticed remarkable similarities between the Chinese description of Ta Ch’in and the idealized Utopia of Taoist texts. Of course, the details may be simple embroidery around a kernel of fact; rather than ‘partial knowledge’, this could be Yule’s ‘precise but fragmentary knowledge’. Unfortunately, it is equally possible to interpret Ta Ch’in as India or Burma – the details, such as they are, would fit either place – so it is unwise to claim (as one recent book has) that “this ‘other China’ must have been the Roman Empire” (R. McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*).

The silk route

In any discussion of Rome and China, thoughts soon turn to the so-called ‘Silk Road’, a nineteenth-century coinage meant to encapsulate the land routes across Central Asia, familiar from the tales of thirteenth-century explorers like Marco Polo. One modern commentator has helpfully confirmed that “we know of no Chinese travellers who certainly went the entire length of the Silk Roads in the classical era” (David Christian, in *Journal of World History* Vol. 11, 2000). Yet much of the modern literature continues to give the impression that, in ancient times, there was a lively coming-and-going along this fabled route. Consider Raoul McLaughlin’s claim that “by using these trails, a few fortunate Romans were able to reach the Chinese Empire”. We gain much the same im-

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The inhospitable terrain of the Hindu Kush forms a daunting barrier between east and west.

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pression from the comment of David Breeze and Brian Dobson, quoted above, or Adrian Goldsworthy's remark that "traders also trekked over vast distances to carry goods overland along the famous Silk Road". But is there any

basis for this belief in long-distance overland communication?

First, it's worth pointing out that there is, in fact, a single reference to such a journey, preserved by Ptolemy, who got it from the now-lost work of a previous geographer named Marinus (*Geography* 1.11.4, 7, 8):

“From the Euphrates crossing to the Stone Tower, the distance is reckoned at 26,280 stades, and from the Stone Tower to Sera, the capital city of the Seres, a journey of seven months, at 36,200 stades. (...) Marinus said that a certain man from Macedonia called Maes, also known as Titianus, a son of a merchant, wrote down the details and measured out the journey, not himself having traversed it, but having sent certain others to Sera. However, it seems that he himself did not

trust the reports of merchants. (...) For he says that they are not concerned to establish the truth, being only interested in commerce, and often increase the distance out of boastfulness. And not once, during the seven-month journey, in the story of their travels, did they deem any marvel worthy of remembrance, except for the length of time.”

It is not clear whether Maes' informants had made the entire journey or had stopped at the Stone Tower, whose whereabouts, in any case, remain a mystery (some have placed it at Darautkurgan in Kyrgyzstan; others prefer Tashkurgan, near the modern Chinese border with Tajikistan). Marinus was suspicious at the lack of detail in their account. Surely their safe arrival at the 'Jade Gate', the westernmost point in ancient China's frontier, after a gruelling thousand-mile journey around the Taklamaken Desert should have merited a mention?

Second, it is also worth pointing out that, leaving the claims of Maes aside, all other traders (as far as we can tell) headed down the Euphrates to the Persian Gulf, where they joined the maritime route to Barygaza. The caravan inscriptions from the great trading city of Palmyra, for example, repeatedly mention successful trips to the Persian Gulf. There is no hint of a 'silk route' heading east across Iran to China. Nevertheless, McLaughlin assures us that "the Parthian subjects of Iran denied Ro-

The ancient Chinese sources

Scholars of ancient China draw upon several state-sponsored historical works, the so-called 'Standard Histories', of which the most important are the *Shi-ji* or *Shih-chi* (the 'Records of the Historian', written in 91 BC), the *Han shu* or *Ch'ien-han-shu* (the 'Book of the Former Han', covering the period 206 BC-AD 24, and written around AD 90), the *Hou-Han shu* (the 'Book of the Later Han', covering the period AD 25-220, and written in the mid-fifth century), and the *Wei-shu* (the 'Book of Wei', covering the period AD 386-550, and written in the mid-sixth century). There is also a lost work known as the *Wei-lüe* or *Wei-liao* (the 'Brief Account of Wei'), part of which is quoted in the *San-guo-zhi* ('Record of the Three Kingdoms'), written in the later third century.

man merchants access to these overland routes”, but offers no proof that such routes existed, beyond the itinerary followed by Alexander the Great (mentioned above).

Tall tales?

Given the unlikelihood of direct contact between the two empires, separated by the great mountain barrier of the Himalayas, what are we to make of the report, in Florus’ *Epitome of Roman History*, that “the Seres and the Indians who live under the very sun” travelled for four years to bring tribute to the Emperor Augustus? No other author corroborates the claim, though the partnership of “Seres and Indians” was in the air in Augustan Rome; both Strabo and Horace repeat the stock phrase. Yet it is remarkable that Augustus himself mentioned only embassies from India, in his monumental *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (‘Achievements of the divine Augustus’).

Another writer who might be expected to have mentioned the Seres is the Antoinine historian Appian, a close contemporary of Ptolemy the geographer. In the last book of his *Civil Wars*, he recorded an event from 41 BC concerning the caravan city of Palmyra. Setting the scene for his second-century readers, he tells us a little about the Palmyrenes: “being merchants, they import Indian and Arabian goods from the Persians and pass them on to the Romans”. This would have been a prime opportunity to mention the Chinese, if Palmyra had been dealing directly with that far off land along the so-called Silk Road. However, we have seen that the route favoured by the Palmyrene caravans followed the Euphrates to the Persian Gulf, where their merchants handled goods arriving by sea.

It is nowadays a common belief that direct diplomatic contact had been achieved by the second century. In one recent popular book, we read that “in 166 (in the wake of Roman victories over the Parthians) envoys arrived in the Han court from Marcus Aurelius, ‘king’ of Rome” (Alfred Bradford, *With Arrow, Sword, and Spear*). No Roman

source betrays the slightest hint of this momentous event. Some have attempted to explain away this silence by claiming that the ‘envoys’ were actually only merchants. But the source of the story, a remark in the Chinese *Hou-Han shu*, says only that “the king of Ta-ts’in, An-tun, sent an embassy from Ji-nan with gifts of ivory, rhinoceros horn, and tortoise shell”. These are curious gifts for a Roman emperor to send, and precisely why they came by way of Ji-nan (thought to be Vietnam) is never explained. And while it is true that, by AD 166, the emperor Marcus Aurelius had, for some time, been styling himself ‘Marcus Antoninus’, this bears only a superficial similarity to ‘An-tun’. Clearly, this tale should be treated with extreme caution.

We should also be suspicious of the complete absence of Roman artefacts from Chinese archaeological sites, and vice versa. In the final analysis, it seems highly doubtful that the Romans had any links with China and the Far East. **AW**

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Further reading

- D.B. Campbell, ‘A Chinese puzzle for the Romans’, *Historia* 38.3 (1989), pp. 371–376.
 - K. Rezaekhani, ‘The road that never was’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30.3 (2010), pp. 420–433.
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Some scholars believe that Tashkurgan marks the location of Ptolemy’s ‘Stone Tower’, but the ruined fort dates from the thirteenth century AD.

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