

THROUGH LAND AND SEA: LONG DISTANCE CONNECTIONS IN ANTIQUITY

KRISZTINA HOPPÁL*

One of the most striking fields of both archaeology and history is that of understanding ancient long distance connections, in which various studies on different aspects of the Silk Road(s) play a crucial role. While in Europe research is largely focused on a Roman perspective, in the Far East it is the Han and later dynasties that serve as view-points in investigating different means of exchange and their social and theoretical backgrounds.

It is no wonder then, that Sino-Roman relations in the 1st-5th centuries—since the two great states are generally considered to be the Western and Eastern ends of the Silk Road—have been one of the most compelling fields of research. The above termini are a significant, but problematic part of the history of the Silk Road(s) and therefore are often misunderstood, especially in terms of Rome and China. For more than two hundred years, many romantic or exaggerated ideas have been revealed describing different kinds of connections between the Roman Empire and the Han and subsequent dynasties. The concept of direct trade between the two great empires and the overestimated significance of the few archaeological remains continue to be placed in prominent focus, even in recent studies.

The seemingly detailed written sources from both sides have further contributed to such beliefs. While the Seres (i.e. silk people) appear in works by Latin and Greek authors such as Pliny the elder or Ptolemy and the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.¹ Chinese histories such as the *Hou Hanshu* (後漢書 Book of the Later Han Dynasty) or the *Wei lue* (魏略 A Brief History of Wei), geographical treatises, Buddhist sutras, etc. describe Daqin 大秦 (i.e. Great Qin, *Fig. 1*).² The identification of the Seres as the Chinese and Daqin as the Roman Empire is a popular practice. However, a detailed analysis of the abovementioned accounts shows a more complicated picture. The often referenced ‘Silk people’ of the Latin and Greek texts can only be understood as a vague ethnonym of silk makers on the easternmost part of the Oikumene,³ and Daqin, which appears as a mystical and utopian country on the westernmost part of the world, as a manifold synonym rather than a realistic interpretation of the Roman Empire.⁴ Thus the identification of the Seres as the Chinese is incorrect, and the recognition of the Daqin as the Roman Empire with its geographical, economical and administrative reality is merely a schematization.

At the same time, both Antique works and Chinese records are clear in the sense that the two great states had some—largely vague and mystified—knowledge about each other as a result of principally indirect connections through a series of middlemen. This can clearly be detected along the sea and land Silk Roads, but cannot be described from the aspect of direct trade relations.

* Archaeologist, Assistant Research Fellow, MTA – ELTE – SZTE Silk Road Research Group

¹ Collection of texts on Seres: Coedès, George: *Textes d’auteurs grecs et latins relatifs à l’Extrême-Orient depuis le IV^e siècle* (Paris: E. Leroux 1910); Lieu, Samuel – Sheldon, John: *Texts of Greek and Latin Authors on the Far East from the 4th century BCE. to the 14th century CE. *Studia Antiqua Australiensis* 4 (2010).*

² Collection of bilingual texts on Daqin: Yu Taishan: *China and the Ancient Mediterranean World: A Survey of Ancient Chinese Sources. *Sino-Platonic Papers* 242 (2013).*

³ The Seres accounts of the 1st-5th century can be considered as collections of information on the easternmost part of the world with only indirect links to the Middle Empire. Although originally the term possibly referred to the South Indian Chēra/Kerala Kingdom Tamil: சேரர்/Malayalam: ചേര/Sanskrit: केरल (circa 500 B.C.-12th century A.D.), from the 1st century A.D. the Seres ethnonym applied to Silk people living beyond the Hemodus (Himalaya) mountain. According to these vague descriptions the territory of the Seres was not consistent with the Middle Kingdom but it can be interpreted as its peripheral region, a sphere of interest.

⁴ Comprehensively e.g.: Kolb, Anne – Speidel, Michael A: *Perceptions from Beyond: Some Observations on Non-Roman Assessments of the Roman Empire from the Great Eastern Trade Routes. *Journal of Ancient Civilizations* 30 (2015), 117–149; Hoppál Krisztina: Contextualizing the comparative perceptions of Rome and China through written sources and archaeological data – Thesis abstract. *Dissertationes Archaeologicae* 3 (2015/2016)/3, 285–302.*



Fig. 1: Ptolemy's map with the land of the Silk people (Serica) <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/23/PtolemyWorldMap.jpg>. Last accessed: 23.04.2015.

Textiles with Chinese silk remains discovered in Pannonia serve as an illustration of these unconventional relations. Silk fragments originating in China (distinguished them from the cheaper and more common wild silks through analysis)⁵ were unearthed from mummy burials in Brigetio,⁶ Aquincum,⁷ and Alsóhetény,⁸ all dated to the 4th century (Figs. 2-3.) These remains were used as part of the bundle made from wool and interwoven with precious Chinese silk threads, typically in Roman manufactures. Therefore, they were made in Roman style and reflected Roman taste, and as a result they were losing contacts with their former place of production i.e. the Middle Empire. In this manner, these rewoven textiles—although they contain alien materials—in their style and weaving technique they can be considered Roman to the core.⁹

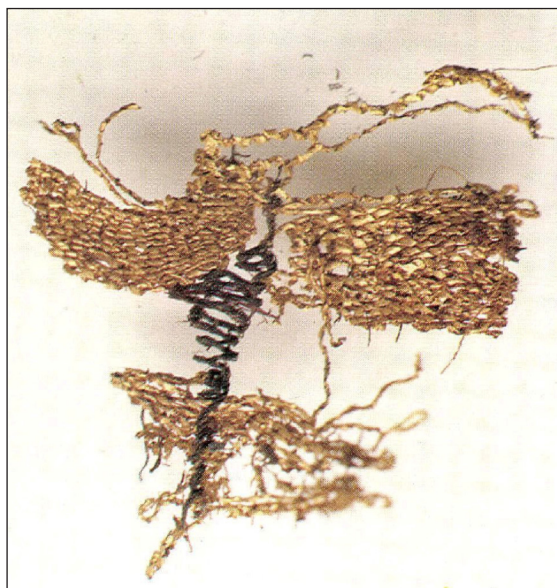
⁵ Hajnal Lászlóné: Az újabb aquincumi múmiasír textilanyagának vizsgálata [Investigating the textile material of the new Aquincum mummy burial]. *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 91 (1964), 192–193; Hajnal, Lászlóné: Textiles from the graves of late Roman Brigetio. *Acta Antiqua* 13 (1965)/1-2, 259–266; Sipos Enikő: Fémfonallal díszített textiltöredékek Heténypusztáról. *Ókor* II (2003)/4, 47–50. On differences between Chinese and wild silks: Pariset, Ernest: *Histoire de la Soie. Ie Partie* (Paris: Auguste Durand Librairie, 1862), 1–8; Böhme-Schönberger, Astrid: *Kleidung und Schmuckin Rom und den Provinzen* (Stuttgart: Konrad Theiss, 1997), 44–46.

⁶ Barkóczi, László: New data on the history of late Roman Brigetio. *Acta Antiqua* 13 (1965)/1-2, 216–257.

⁷ Póczy Klára: Újabb aquincumi múmiasír. *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 91 (1964), 176–191. On mummy burials in summary: Póczy Klára: A pannoniai későszászárkori múmiatemetkezések néhány tanulsága. *Budapest Régiségei* 32 (1998), 59–76.

⁸ Tóth Endre: Az alsóhetényi 4. századi erőd és temető kutatása, 1981–1986. Eredmények és vitás kérdések. *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 114 (1987), 22–61; Tóth, Endre: Die spätrömische Festung von Iovia und ihr Gräberfeld. *Antike Welt. Zeitschrift für Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte* 20 (1989)/1, 31–39; Tóth Endre: *Studia Valeriana. Az alsóhetényi és ságvári késő római erődök kutatásának eredményei*. Helytörténeti Sorozat 8 (Dombóvár 2009)

⁹ Hoppál Krisztina: *Vestis serica et odium luxoriae*. Kínai selyemeletek Pannoniában. *Tisicum* 25 (2017), 209–222.



Figs. 2-3: Textiles with silk remains from Alsóhetény. Sipos 1990, table II

Similarly, to the Pannonian silks threads, Roman glass objects discovered in China also illustrate indirect connections. Particularly interesting is the case of transparent glass vessels unearthed in the eastern coastal part of China. Despite the fact that without chemical composition analyses it is more than problematic to differentiate Roman and Sassanian wares, these thin walled transparent objects form an apparent group (Fig. 4.) By date and localisation three main groups of transparent glass vessels previously interpreted as Roman can be formed. These are the Ganquan Region, the Nanjing Region, and the Northern or Later Group (5th-6th centuries). All these imported objects were discovered in the burials of emperors and their closest men: a well-defined and limited stratum of Chinese aristocracy, with not only considerable wealth but prestige as well.¹⁰

Although it is a common idea to interpret these western-imported objects as luxurious items available to the highborn, the *potestas* [power] and *auctoritas* [authority] of their owners also played an important role in owning them. These jade-like materials were highly treasured because of their transparency, rarity and mysterious characteristics—at least until the 6th century and the appearance of advanced glass-making techniques in China. It

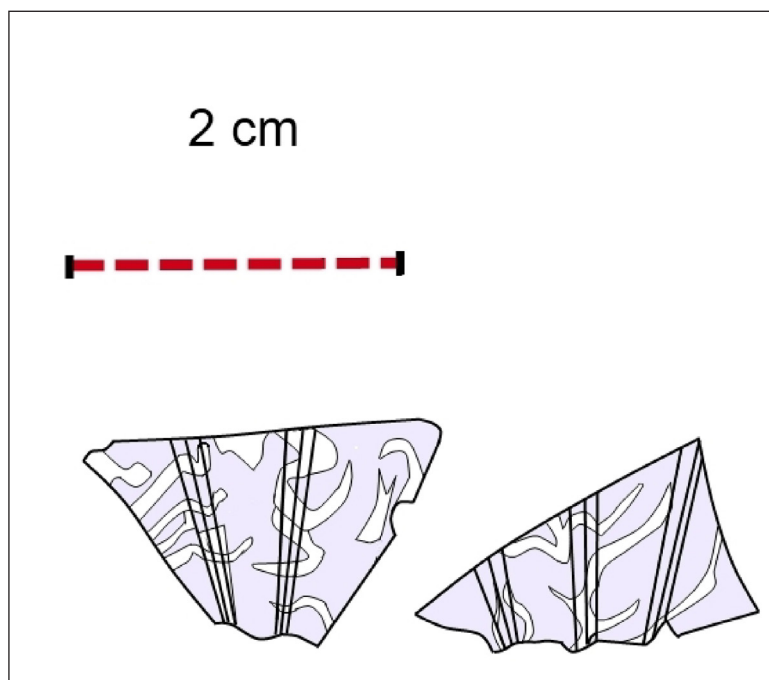


Fig. 4: Roman marbled ribbed bowl from Shuangshan Ganquan. The author's own work based on 南京博物院 Nanjing Bowuyuan: 江苏邗江甘泉二号汉墓 Jiangsu Hanjiang Ganquan Erhao Hanmu [Jiangsu Hanjiang Ganquan Han tomb No. 2]. 文物 Wenwu [Cultural Relics] 11 (1981).

¹⁰ Hoppál, Krisztina: Contextualising Roman-related Glass Artefacts in China. An Integrated Approach to Sino-Roman Relations. *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 67 (2016), 99–114.

is also important to take into account that the fragments discovered are well known forms of Western glass manufactures being produced in large quantities for the regular market, not as luxury goods.¹¹

These observations might lead into the concept of immaterial worth: transparent glass vessels might be rare prestige objects, belongings of the highborn, with a value beyond the material and the financial. It also proves the indirect connections between Rome and China employing a series of middlemen across the land and sea Silk Road(s.)

At the same time, it is possible to get a better understanding on the above detailed complex and hardly depreciable relation of the two empires through a theoretical approach, namely by using the concepts of *perceptio* [perception] and *receptio* [reception]. The mutual perceptions of Rome and China can be characterised by series of typical utopian *topoi*, mixed with fictive and realistic elements, and represented through a complex and stereotyped filter along with moral, intellectual, and ideological standards of the age.

The various responses on the non-local play an important role in forming the reception of the foreign in Chinese and Roman society which can also be depicted by using the archaeological data. Objects of cross-cultural interactions such as transparent glass vessels in China, and Chinese silk remains in Pannonia, can be used not only to understand different ways of seeing and being seen, but also to reveal possible forms of selection, evaluation, appropriation, etc.¹²

As illustrated above, archaeological finds are hardly eligible to prove direct trade connections between the Roman Empire and the Middle Kingdom in the 1st-5th century. Consequently, drawing any further conclusions is also problematic, just as it is between the Imperium and other Silk Road states.

This is especially true for Roman coins found in the Far East, such as in the People's Republic of China or Indonesia. These coins were typically discovered as stray finds without any systematic investigation. Despite the fact that it is quite easy to use them as evidence of direct (trade) relations, it is also completely unscientific. Roman and Byzantine currencies discovered in the area of Tuban (Tuban city, Tuban regency; Kota Tuban, Kabupaten Tuban) serve as an excellent example (*Fig. 5*.)

The Roman *sestertius* and two Byzantine *folles* are currently under examination in cooperation with Shinatricia Adhityatama from the Pusat Arkeologi Nasional Jakarta (The National Research Centre for Archaeology, Jakarta) and István Vida from the Hungarian National Museum. The coins were found by local peasants in the rivers of the Tuban region, but their original context is unknown and even the handover date is uncertain. At the same time, Tuban has a particular historical significance due partly to its favourable geographical conditions. A famous port, Tuban was mentioned in Hindu-Buddhist inscriptions as early as the 11th-12th centuries. From the 13th century, Tuban is known as one of the major ports¹³ of the notable Majapahit Kingdom (1293-16th century),¹⁴ and was also mentioned in Chinese historical records.¹⁵

However, we know hardly anything about the Roman and Byzantine coins found near Tuban, which makes it impossible to draw any conclusions regarding the problem of how they ended up in East Java. As in the cases of other coins with similarly uncertain context discovered in the Far East, the existence of these objects alone is not enough to form a basis for conjecture. At the same time, the presence of these coins in a

¹¹ An exception is a unique duck shaped glass discovered in Feng Sufu's burial (辽宁北票县西官营子Xiguanyingzi, Beipiao, Liaoning province). The first minister of the Northern Yan Dynasty died in 415. His grave goods contained Sassanian and Roman glass artefacts among which only the one duck shaped glass can be considered as luxurious item, possibly made in the area of Aegyptus.

Li Yaobo 黎瑶渤: Liaoning Beipiaoxian Xiguanyingzi Beiyuan Feng Sufu mu 辽宁北票县西官营子北燕冯素弗墓 [Feng Sufu's tomb from Liaoning Beipiaoxian Xiguanyingzi]. *Wenwu* 文物 [Cultural Relics] 3 (1973), 2–19; Liaoning Provincial Museum 辽宁省博物馆 (编著ed.) 北燕冯素弗 *Beiyuan Feng Sufu* [Feng Sufu Couple's Tombs of the Northern Yan] (Wenwu Chubanshe 文物出版社 [Cultural Relics Press] 2015).

¹² Hoppál Krisztina: Contextualizing the comparative perceptions of Rome and China through written sources and archaeological data – Thesis abstract. *Dissertationes Archaeologicae* 3 (2015/2016)/3, 285302.

¹³ About Tuban in the Majapahit Kingdom e.g.: Tjandrasasmita, Uka: *Arkeologi Islam Nusantara* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2010), 52–54; Muljana, Slamet: *Menuju puncak kemegahan: sejarah kerajaan Majapahit* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2007).

¹⁴ F. Kovács Péter: Egy birodalom központjában. Régészeti és történelmi kiállítóhelyek Trowulanban. *Tisicum* 24 (2014), 147–154

¹⁵ On Tuban in detail: Pratomo, Oni: *Makna struktur dan unsur pembentuk pusat kota pelabuhan Tuban kajian morfologi dan silang budaya pusat kota pesisir* (MA thesis: Universitas Diponegoro, 2000) 31–34; Sedyawati, Edi: *Tuban: Kota Pelabuhan Di Jalan Sutera* (Jakarta: Depdikbud, 1992).



Fig. 5: Tuban in the Singasari Kingdom (1222-1292). <https://mbahrogo.files.wordpress.com/2008/06/wilayah-kerajaan-singosari.jpg>. Last accessed: 06/07/2017

port as centrally located as Tuban with its extra- and intra-regional significance is, if not directly, a reflection of the connections between Indonesia and the Western world. Therefore, in analysing these coins—as in other issues discovered in the Far East—might help us to have a better insight into the history of the sea and land Silk Roads.

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