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## Roman Views of the Chinese in Antiquity

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# Roman Views of the Chinese in Antiquity

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**Abstract:** How did the ancient Romans view the Chinese? In this short essay I briefly analyze Roman imaginings of the “Seres,” as the Romans of the ancient Mediterranean world called the natives of China. During the Roman Empire, in the first to third centuries AD, intense commercial and cultural contacts were maintained between East and West through the Silk Road. It is a portrait of the Chinese as they were seen in the Western world that I build here.

**Keywords:** Roman Empire; Silk Road; cultural dialogue; Roman imaginary

## INTRODUCTION

In the field of classical studies, there is recently new interest in the relationship of the West and the Far East in antiquity. Obviously this field is vast, yet it has been little and sporadically explored. India and China represent two challenging civilizations, each with its own historical models, and therefore the study of their older historical periods requires a certain degree of specialized knowledge. But there is a good amount of Greco-Roman documentation of observations of these cultures that allows us to reconstruct the imagery regarding them that existed in the Mediterranean world.

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In this discussion I seek to collect and analyze fragments of literature and history concerning the Chinese that survive in the Classic Greco-Roman documentation, during the first to the third centuries AD, when a Eurasian axis formed along the Silk Road. This axis joined the four great empires of the time — Rome, Parthia, Kushan, and China — in an extensive commercial and cultural network, responsible for the formation of a rich and fertile exchange. Writings conveying the Roman imaginary about China reveal that the ancient world was much wider and more open than we usually believe, offering an interaction among societies to which most experts in classical studies pay insufficient attention.

## HISTORIOGRAPHY

The study of the relations between Rome and China is not in fact new. Friederich Hirth<sup>2</sup> wrote the first book on the subject, using a wide collection of fragments that pointed to the relations between the two civilizations in antiquity. Many Chinese fragments that speak about the Roman world are presented. Similarly, George Coedès<sup>3</sup> created an anthology (not yet superseded) of Greek and Latin texts written about the Far East. Four decades later, a theory was in vogue to the effect that the collapse of the Roman Empire took place due to the interruption of the Silk Road. This thesis was defended by renowned archaeologists such as Sir Mortimer Wheeler.<sup>4</sup> The matter was taken up by authors such as Frederick Teggart<sup>5</sup>, whose work listed the political events of the Roman Empire and the Chinese Empire in synchrony. John Ferguson<sup>6</sup> also addressed the issue by discussing the relations between the two civilizations. The lack of more solid archaeological evidence, as well as of an

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<sup>2</sup> Friederich Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into Their Ancient and Medieval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records* (Hong Kong, 1885).

<sup>3</sup> George Coedès, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et latins relatifs à L'Extrême Orient* (New York: Ares Publishers, 1977; first published 1910).

<sup>4</sup> Sir Mortimer Wheeler, *The Rome beyond the Imperial Frontiers* (London: Penguin, 1955), pp. 203–214.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Teggart, *Rome and China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969; first published 1939) pp. v-xii, 225–241.

<sup>6</sup> John Ferguson, "China and Rome," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt im Spiegel der neueren Forschung* (II 9.2, 1978), pp. 581–603.

appropriate theoretical model, prevented this theory from being fully developed at the time. Nevertheless, the idea was never abandoned, and the development of Asian archaeology has since contributed substantially to this discussion.

In 1971, John Thorley<sup>7</sup> entered this field of research, publishing an article in which he discussed more broadly the question of Rome–China relations. As a result, Yves Janvier<sup>8</sup> did important work on the conceptualization of the Chinese in the Roman world. Meanwhile, Aly Mazahery<sup>9</sup> published a remarkable study on the integration of the ancient world along the Silk Road, and Jean-Noel Robert, similarly, analyzed the cultural relations between Rome and China, based on the Roman view.

In 2002, I published my study,<sup>10</sup> extending the question to what could be called a *world system* in antiquity. In the same year, Warrick Ball<sup>11</sup> presented his work, addressing the Roman view of the East. Ball is an esteemed expert on Asian archaeology, with a deep knowledge of the subject. Soon after, Gary Young<sup>12</sup> released his book on the trade routes linking the Roman world and the East, from the Mediterranean to more remote areas, and, continuing, Raoul McLaughlin<sup>13</sup> presented the results of his doctoral thesis, outlining the most complete picture to date of the commercial and cultural relations between the Mediterranean world dominated by the Romans and the East.

A feature of these studies is that all basically repeat the same literary information from the Greco-Roman sources, with few variations; however, they are enriched by the archaeological discoveries in progress, which makes the framework for relations between Romans and Asians increasingly vivid. Another important point regarding all the authors cited here is that these are

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7 John Thorley, "The silk trade between China and the Roman Empire at its height, circa A.D. 90–130," *Greece & Rome* 18(1) (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971).

8 Yves Janvier, "Rome et l'Orient lointain: le problèmes des serres," in *Ktema* 9 (Strasbourg, 1984).

9 Aly Mazahery, *La Route de Soie* (Paris: Papyrus, 1983).

10 André Bueno, *Rotas do Mundo Antigo* (União da Vitória, Brazil: Projeto Orientalismo, 2002).

11 Warrick Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformations of Empire* (London: Routledge, 2002).

12 Gary Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade* (London: Routledge, 2001).

13 Raoul McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East* (London: Continuum, 2010).

experts in history and/or archaeology, ruling out any risk of dealing with exotic or fantastic proposals. We are in a safe zone, supported by solid argument and based on established sources.

A new kind of historical literature that discusses the possible relationships between Rome and China has recently emerged, based on a comparative method in search of intercultural dialogue models and the formulation of broader historical structures. The work of Achten Mittag and Fritz-Heiner Mutschler<sup>14</sup> draws a broad comparison between the two civilizations; in the same direction, the volume edited by Walter Scheidel<sup>15</sup> seeks to establish commonalities between the two imperial models. Scheidel, in more recent work,<sup>16</sup> invests in the analysis of state and power relations in China and Rome, continuing to this field of research in classical studies.

Thus, we see a renewed interest in the question of relations between Rome and China for which we have reliable and trustworthy sources. In this brief essay, I offer a contribution, presenting aspects of Roman imagery of the Chinese, based on literary fragments.

## THE CHINESE IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

In the third century AD, the chronicler Solinus said the following about the Chinese:

When we returned from the Ocean Sythique and the Caspian Sea, we headed toward the Eastern Ocean. From the beginning of the coast, we found deep snows, long deserts, cruel people and places, cannibals and the most terrible wild beasts, which make this half of the road practically impassable. Whoever reaches the end of this road will find a mountain that dominates the sea, which the barbarians call "Tabis." Passing through it, we continued to traverse immense deserts. After arriving on the coast in the northeast, and crossing vast uninhabited regions, the first people we hear

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<sup>14</sup> Achten Mittag and Fritz-Heiner Mutschler, *Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Walter Scheidel, ed., *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Walter Scheidel, ed., *State Power in Ancient China and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

about are the "Seres"; they sprinkle water on the leaves of certain trees, to make them humid so to produce a substance that will turn into skeins similar to cotton. This is called "sericum" [silk], which we know and use, which awakens a passion in women for luxury, and with which even our men dress now, leaving their bodies on display. The "Seres" are civilized and peaceful people, but avoid contact with other people, refusing to trade with other nations. Every time they cross the river and out of their country to do business, they do not use their language, or talk; they make an estimate with a look, and stipulate a price. They prefer, by the way, only to sell their products, but do not like to buy our goods.<sup>17</sup>

It is difficult to know whether these were indeed Chinese merchants. The language barrier and the different physical appearance give us interesting evidence. In fact, the Romans of that time had curious impressions of the "Seres" (as they termed the inhabitants of "Serica" or "Sinae," the "Land of Silk," i.e., China). But Bardaisan, in his religious ethnography in the "Book of the Laws of the Countries," comments positively on the Chinese civilization:

*Laws of the Seres:* The Seres have laws forbidding to kill, or to commit impurity, or to worship idols; and in the whole of Serica there are no idols, and no harlots, nor any one that kills a man, nor any that is killed: although they, like other men, are born at all hours and on all days. Thus the fierce Mars, whenever he is "posited" in the zenith, does not overpower the freedom of the Seres, and compel a man to shed the blood of his fellow with an iron weapon; nor does Venus, when posited with Mars, compel any man whatever among the Seres to consort with his neighbor's wife, or with any other

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<sup>17</sup> *Polyhistory* LI, in Solinus, *Polyhistoire*, cited in George Coedès, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et latins relatifs à l'Extrême Orient* (New York: Ares Publishers, 1977), p. 84. Translation by author.

woman. Rich and poor, however, and sick people and healthy, and rulers and subjects, are there: because such matters are given into the power of the Governors.<sup>18</sup>

In a similar passage, Origen argued that the Chinese were not atheists, but would be inclined to know God, though they still live in ignorance of the divine:

To this our answer is, that if the Scythians, the nomadic tribes of Libya, the Seres, who according to Celsus have no god, if those other most barbarous and impious nations in the world, and if the Persians even cannot bear the sight of temples, altars, and images, it does not follow because we cannot suffer them any more than they, that the grounds on which we object to them are the same as theirs. We must inquire into the principles on which the objection to temples and images is founded, in order that we may approve of those who object on sound principles, and condemn those whose principles are false. [...] As, then, this act of self-restraint, which in appearance is one and the same, is found in fact to be different in different persons, according to the principles and motives which lead to it; so in the same way with those who cannot allow in the worship of the Divine Being altars, or temples, or images. The Scythians, the Nomadic Libyans, the godless Seres, and the Persians, agree in this with the Christians and Jews, but they are actuated by very different principles. For none of these former abhor altars and images on the ground that they are afraid of degrading the worship of God, and reducing it to the worship of material things wrought by the hands of men.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bardaisan, "The Book of the Laws of the Countries," in *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*, trans. Hans Drijvers (Assen, Netherlands: Auflage, 1965), p. 41.

<sup>19</sup> *Contra Celsus* VII: 63–64, in Origen, *Contra Celsus*, cited in George Coedès, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et latins relatifs à l'Extrême Orient* (New York: Ares Publishers, 1977), pp. 82–83.



These small glimpses, succinct as they are, provide us with a positive image of the Chinese; but how did that come to be? The Chinese had already appeared in Roman literature for two centuries at this point. Some knowledge the Romans possessed was quite specific, such as the extent of the Chinese Empire, or that the Chinese were silk producers. For this reason, we can see that it is possible that the Romans had consolidated, over that time, a favorable view of China as a complex and developed civilization. However, this sympathetic opinion was not the earliest they held. As we shall see, the way along which knowledge of the Chinese came to the Romans was long and the information posited at times largely inaccurate.

## THE PATHS TO THE ROMAN EMPIRE

In the period considered here, the first to third centuries AD, a significant number of references to the Chinese and their goods were made in Greek and Latin literature, under the rule of the Roman Empire. Nothing prevents the presence of these Chinese products earlier than at the period under discussion here, but I have selected this time frame in order to be sure the information I analyze here is securely grounded.

The central element of trade between Rome and China was silk. With the establishment of the Silk Road by the Han dynasty in the first century BC, the flow of goods into the West increased considerably. Silk was the main and most profitable product of Chinese export. In addition to its attractiveness, its manufacturing method was unknown, and this added to its allure. Silk was widely used by the Roman elite as a statement of power and prestige, a social differentiator. Therefore, its consumption in the Roman world was great, although it was quite expensive.

Pliny the Elder bequeathed us an important fragment, complaining of the extent to which the Romans spent money on Chinese silk:

By the lowest reckoning, India, Seres and the Arabian peninsula take from our Empire a hundred million sesterces every year: that is how much our luxuries and women cost us.<sup>20</sup>

All of this, he claimed, was to sustain an elite concerned only with social ostentation, who despised the value of morality and economic austerity:

It is necessary to peregrinate until the end of the world so that our ladies can wrap their beauty with transparent silk veils, and men spend their possessions on the acquisition of the tissue.<sup>21</sup>

Pliny, to our surprise, knew the rudiments of silk production, although he thought the thread-producing caterpillars acted like spiders:

The larva [of the "bombyx"] then becomes a caterpillar, after which it assumes the state in which it is known as "bombylis," then that called "necydalus," and after that, in six months, it becomes a silk-worm. These insects weave webs similar to those of the spider, the material of which is used for making the more costly and luxurious garments of females, known as "bombycina." Pamphile, a woman of Cos, the daughter of Platea, was the first person who discovered the art of unravelling these webs and spinning a tissue therefrom; indeed, she ought not to be deprived of the glory of having discovered the art of making vestments which, while they cover a woman, at the same moment reveal her naked charms.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* XII, 84, trans. John Bostock (London: Taylor and Francis, 1885).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. VI, 53–54 (or, VI, 6:20–21); see also XII, 17, and XIV, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. XI, 26.

Finally, he complained that the Chinese did not like to buy, but only to sell — showing that the observation that "the Chinese traders were closed," quoted by Solinus decades later, had been made much earlier.

The rest of their information was of a similar nature to that communicated by our merchants. It was to the effect that the merchandize on sale was left by them upon the opposite bank of a river on their coast, and it was then removed by the natives, if they thought proper to deal on terms of exchange. On no grounds ought luxury with greater reason to be detested by us, than if we only transport our thoughts to these scenes, and then reflect, what are its demands, to what distant spots it sends in order to satisfy them, and for how mean and how unworthy an end!<sup>23</sup>

Pliny's concern was that a great deal of money was leaving the Roman Empire. Although there was a bureaucratic structure overseeing tax collection, it is difficult to track how much was actually being spent on the import of luxury goods. Thorley<sup>24</sup> says that a Roman deficit probably characterized the relationship between the Romans and their trading partners. Paul Veyne,<sup>25</sup> however, criticizes this pessimistic view, arguing that Pliny might have overlooked contravening information, involved as he was in promoting the austerity policy initiated by the emperor Tiberius. The latest studies are wary of this debate, although the great many Roman coins that have been found in India and China<sup>26</sup> show that the Romans spent heavily on foreign trade.

Regardless of its effect upon the Roman Empire's treasure, the point we are concerned with

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. VI, 88 (or VI, 6:24). Indeed, a comparison with the text of Pliny shows us that Solinus probably copied the book *Natural History*. We must remember, however, that this does not discredit his observation that the Chinese were circulating throughout the Roman Empire. The practice of textual copy was quite common at the time.

<sup>24</sup> Thorley, "The silk trade," pp. 76–77.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Veyne, "Rome devant la pretendue fuite de l'or: mercantilisme ou politique disciplinaire?," in *Annales*, 2, 1979, pp. 211–244.

<sup>26</sup> André Tchernia, "Moussons et monnaies: les voies du commerce entre le monde greco-romain et l'Inde," in *Annales*, 5, 1995, pp. 1007–1009. See also McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, pp. 141–178.

here is that, along with silk came the imagining of its makers: who were the Chinese? Who were the craftsmen whose wares charmed the ladies of Roman society, and made their husbands spend fortunes on imported products? This superlative ability of the Chinese ensures they were thought of as a powerful and developed nation, expanding significantly Roman knowledge of the ancient world.

#### WHO WERE THE "SERES"?

Florus, based on a fragment of *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*,<sup>27</sup> said the Chinese — the "sinaes" or "seres" — sent emissaries to pay homage to Augustus:

Now that all the races of the west and south were subjugated, and also the races of the north, (...) the Scythians and the Sarmatians sent ambassadors seeking friendship; the Seres too and the Indians, who live immediately beneath the sun, though they brought elephants amongst their gifts as well as precious stones and pearls, regarded their long journey, in the accomplishment of which they had spent four years, as the greatest tribute which they rendered, and indeed their complexion proved that they came from beneath another sky.<sup>28</sup>

The silk manufacturers were seen as powerful people, but also dangerous. Much before Florus, Horace spoke of the Chinese as a courageous and disciplined people, but foolhardy:

Dread Sire and Guardian of man's race,  
To Thee, O Jove, the Fates assign  
Our Caesar's charge; his power and place  
Be next to Thine.

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<sup>27</sup> *Res Gestae* 31–33, in Augustus, *Velleius Paterculus and Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, trans. Frederick Shipley (London: Loeb, 1924).

<sup>28</sup> *Epitomae* II, 34, in Florus, *Epitome of Roman History*, trans. Edward Foster (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1929).

Whether the Parthian, threatening Rome,  
His eagles scatter to the wind,  
Or follow to their eastern home  
Cathay and Indi,  
Thy second let him rule below:  
Thy car shall shake the realms above;  
Thy vengeful bolts shall overthrow  
Each guilty grove.<sup>29</sup>

The poet Martial shared the view that the Chinese could pose a threat, but invoked the power of the Roman Caesar to impose order:

Ye rulers of the Parthians and  
chiefs of the Seres, Thracians, Sauromatians, Getians,  
Britons, I can show you a Caesar: come!<sup>30</sup>

However, the Roman alternated his fear of the Chinese with awe. Pomponius Mela, anticipating Bardaisan and Origen, affirmed that:

The Seres are in between, a people full of justice and best known for the trade they conduct in absentia, by leaving their goods behind in a remote location.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Horace, *Odes and Epodes* I, 12. The translator, John Conington, uses the word "Cathay" to translate "Chinese." See also: I, 29; III, 29.; IV, 15 (Boston: B.H. Sanborn & Co., 1919).

<sup>30</sup> *Epigrams* XII, 8; see also: III, 82; IX, 37; XI, 8; XI, 27, in Martial, *Epigrammata*, trans. Walter Ker (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1919).

<sup>31</sup> *Chorographia* III, 60, in Pomponius Mela, *Pomponius Mela's Description of the World*, trans. Frank Romer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

Ovid<sup>32</sup> also mentions the admiration felt for the artistic beauty of Chinese fabrics. The main issue of concern, however, continued to be the fact that profit from this trade evaded the Roman Empire. Seneca complained openly about the indiscriminate use of silk, which he considered immoral and costly:

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 labor 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.<sup>33</sup>

Tacitus followed the same line, calling for an imperial intervention against the excessive spending of the Roman elite:

On the next day of the Senate's meeting much was said against the luxury of the country by Quintus Haterius, an ex-consul, and by Octavius Fronto, an ex-praetor. It was decided that vessels of solid gold should not be made for the serving of food, and that men should not disgrace themselves with silken clothing from the East. Fronto went further, and insisted on restrictions being put on plate, furniture, and household establishments. It was indeed still usual with the Senators, when it was their turn to vote, to suggest anything they thought for the State's advantage. Gallus Asinius argued on the other side. "With the growth of the empire, private wealth too had increased," he said, "and there was nothing new in this, but it accorded with the fashions of the earliest antiquity. Riches were one thing with the Fabricii, quite another with the Scipios. The State was the standard of everything; when it was poor, the homes of the citizens were humble; when it reached such magnificence, private grandeur increased. In household establishments, and plate, and in whatever was provided for use, there

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<sup>32</sup> *Amores* I, 14, in Ovid, *Amores*, trans. John Conington (London: George Bell and Sons, 1882).

<sup>33</sup> *Excerpta Controversiae* II, 7, in Seneca, *Declamations, Volume I: Controversiae, Books 1–6*, trans. Michael Winterbottom (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).

was neither excess nor parsimony except in relation to the fortune of the possessor. A distinction had been made in the assessments of Senators and knights, not because they differed naturally, but that the superiority of the one class in places in the theatre, in rank and in honor, might be also maintained in everything else which insured mental repose and bodily recreation, unless indeed men in the highest position were to undergo more anxieties and more dangers, and to be at the same time deprived of all solace under those anxieties and dangers." [...]<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps in any other matter, Senators, it would be more convenient that I should be consulted in your presence, and then state what I think to be for the public good. In this debate it was better that my eyes should not be on you, for while you were noting the anxious faces of individual senators charged with shameful luxury, I too myself might observe them and, as it were, detect them. Had those energetic men, our aediles, first taken counsel with me, I do not know whether I should not have advised them to let alone vices so strong and so matured, rather than merely attain the result of publishing what are the corruptions with which we cannot cope. They however have certainly done their duty, as I would wish all other officials likewise to fulfill their parts. For myself, it is neither seemly to keep silence nor is it easy to speak my mind, as I do not hold the office of aedile, praetor, or consul. Something greater and loftier is expected of a prince, and while everybody takes to himself the credit of right policy, one alone has to bear the odium of every person's failures. For what am I first to begin with restraining and cutting down to the old standard? The vast dimensions of country houses? The number of slaves of every nationality? The masses of silver and gold? The marvels in bronze and painting? The apparel worn indiscriminately by both sexes, or that peculiar luxury of women which, for the sake of jewels, diverts our wealth to strange or hostile nations?<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Annals*, II 33, in *The Work of Tacitus*, trans. Alfred Church and William Brodribb (London: MacMillan, 1877).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, *Annals* III, 53.

However, to no avail were such complaints. Interest in the "Seres" was still very great, which led the cartographers of the time to consider: where is China?

## WHERE IS CHINA?

We must bear in mind that the notion of geography in that period was governed by clear political interests. As analyzes Norma Mendes:

The two key areas that structured the mental universe of the Romans are the *Urbs et Orbis Terrarum*. The *Urbs* is the center of the world, the city's social life, pleasure, temples, wealth, culture and power. *Orbis Terrarum* is represented gradually at the time of conquest on the occasion of the victory ceremonies. Along the parade route were displayed maps showing all the cities and the names of the mountains and rivers conquered, demonstrating the cartographic knowledge of the time, including the shape and distance of subject areas. After the ceremony these maps were painted on the walls of the temples according to the pace of achievements. Of course, for political and administrative reasons these maps were intended to visualize the possession of the world. With the formal establishment of the Principality, in 27 BC, was consolidated the divine mission of conquest, domination, pacification and organization of the entire world by the Romans under the rule of Princeps. Such ecumenical conception was conveyed by *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, whose figurative character may have been the main objective of drafting a universal map of the Roman world.<sup>36</sup>

For this reason, when it was necessary to identify the Far East, the first Roman maps were not at all accurate. Professional cartographers such as Strabo<sup>37</sup> and Agrippa<sup>38</sup> had trouble locating China.

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<sup>36</sup> Norma Mendes, "As relações entre o princeps e o populus romanorum através do transcrito public," *Helade* 2 (1), 2001, pp. 39–49. Translation by author.

<sup>37</sup> *Geographia* XV, 1, 4; XV, 1, 37, in Strabo, *Geography*, trans. John Sitlington (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917).



Even before this, Lucan<sup>39</sup> and Horace<sup>40</sup> demonstrated an absolute ignorance, showing the Chinese spread all throughout Asia and even in Africa! Pausanias gives us a clear example of how one could combine a sensitive description of the silk creation with absolute geographic ignorance:

Now while hemp and flax, both the ordinary and the fine variety, are sown by those whose soil is suited to grow it, the threads from which the Seres make the dresses are produced from no bark, but in a different way as follows. There is in the land of the Seres an insect which the Greeks call ser, though the Seres themselves give it another name.

Its size is twice that of the largest beetle, but in other respects it is like the spiders that spin under trees, and furthermore it has, like the spider, eight feet. These creatures are reared by the Seres, who build them houses adapted for winter and for summer. The product of the creatures, a clue of fine thread, is found rolled round their feet.

They keep them for four years, feeding them on millet, but in the fifth year, knowing that they have no longer to live, they give them green reed to eat. This of all foods the creature likes best; so it stuffs itself with the reed till it bursts with surfeit, and after it has thus died they find inside it the greater part of the thread. Serica is known to be an island lying in a recess of the Red Sea.

But I have heard that it is not the Red Sea, but a river called Ser, that makes this island, just as in Egypt the Delta is surrounded by the Nile and by no sea. Such another island is Seria said to be. These Seres themselves are of Aethiopian race, as are

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38 Claude Nicolet, "Representation of Space: Agrippa's Geographical Work," in *Space, Geography, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), pp. 95–122.

39 *Pharsalia* I, 19–20; X, 141–143; X, 292–293, in Lucano, *Pharsalia*, cited in George Coedès, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et latins relatifs à L'Extreme Orient* (New York: Ares Publishers, 1977). Translation by author.

40 *Epodes*, VIII, 15, in Horace, *Odes and Epodes* (Boston: B.H. Sanborn & Co., 1919).

the inhabitants of the neighboring islands, Abasa and Sacaea. Some say, however, that they are not Ethiopians but a mongrel race of Scythians and Indians.<sup>41</sup>

Pomponius Mela, however, had already identified the Chinese as living just at the exact location of India, at a time when China dominated large portions of that area. This finding was a direct reflection of China's expansion along the Silk Road, which led the Han dynasty to the borders of Kushan India. The work of Ptolemy, however, overshadowed much of his predecessors. He managed to target China with reasonable accuracy, and to identify possible routes for the Silk Road.<sup>42</sup>

The evolution of this knowledge shows us that information was reaching the Roman world, whether through their own agents or through the Chinese presence. Perhaps, therefore, the information offered by Solinus some time later is not impossible: that the Chinese were coming to Rome, just as the Chinese said the Romans sent embassies to their own country.<sup>43</sup> Again, we cannot know whether these claims are true. The assertion reveals, however, that the Chinese seemed sufficiently important that the Romans developed a vision of them and had a sense of respect.

## THE ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY

We now return to the beginning of our textual fragments. Solinus, as did Bardasano and Origen, lived in a time when Rome seemed to show its first signs of fatigue. Solinus invoked Pliny the Elder's earlier speech on austerity, while Bardasano and Origen shared a new way of looking at the world: the Christian doctrine. However, a remarkable change marked the transformation of these discourses: foreigners, previously threatening, were now taken as examples of civilization. To dramatize the decay of Roman customs, these writers invoked images of other civilizations to illustrate an ideal way of life.

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<sup>41</sup> *Description of Greece* VI, 26, 6–9, in Pausanias, *Pausanias, Description of Greece, with an English Translation*, trans. William Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1918).

<sup>42</sup> *Ptolemy's Geographia* I, 11; I, 13–14; VI, 16, in Ptolemy, *Géographie*, cited in George Coedès, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et latins relatifs à L'Extreme Orient* (New York: Ares Publishers, 1977).

<sup>43</sup> André Bueno, *Rotas do Mundo Antigo* (União da Vitória, Brazil: Projeto Orientalismo, 2002), pp. 63–65.

Christians went beyond: a way of life, completely new, was being built. In "The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus," for example, a picture of the Christians is offered:

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.<sup>44</sup>

This world without cultural boundaries was the invention of the Christians. Writers like Bardasano, and then Cesarius,<sup>45</sup> believed that such orderly and civilized societies as that of the Chinese, were suitable sites for the expansion of Christian doctrine, and demonstrated the compassion of God for peoples who do not know Him.<sup>46</sup> The third century AD, therefore, ended with a

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<sup>44</sup> *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus* 5, 2–4, in Peter Kirby, "Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus," in *Early Christian Writings*. Available at: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/diognetus.html> (accessed December 2015).

<sup>45</sup> *Dialogues* II, 109, in Cesarius, *Dialogues*, cited in George Coedès, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et latins relatifs à L'Extrême Orient* (New York: Ares Publishers, 1977).

<sup>46</sup> André Bueno, "Etnografia religiosa no Livro das Leis dos Países," *NEARCO* (Núcleo de Estudos da Antiguidade, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro) 2 (2015), pp. 15–25.

positive view of distant China. But Roman attention would soon turn from interest in contact with distant nations to the question of the very survival of the empire.

## CONCLUSION

In constructing their images of the Chinese, the Romans produced their own ideas. The Chinese, however, were far away; they were powerful but unforthcoming; they did not seem threatening, but they were clearly a developed civilization. It was possible to think of the Chinese world as safer and more sympathetic than Parthia, for example.

We cannot say with certainty that all of the institutional contacts between Romans and Chinese were benign and open, but certainly China was never considered an enemy. The Chinese were viewed with curiosity, and sometimes with fear. Although they were seen as barbarians, they were not treated with scorn.<sup>47</sup> That theirs was a complex civilization, developed and sophisticated, was not overlooked in the Roman imagination. The Chinese remained mysterious, and their presence in the Roman world aroused a fascination and curiosity that in the Christian era turned into admiration. In any case, the land of "Seres" was a special place, a wonderful and magical country, that enjoyed both the miraculous product of silk and a people blessed by Nature:

There are nations that enjoy a great longevity. We refer, for example, to the Seres, who live three hundred years. Some attribute their longevity to the air, others to the sun, still others to their food. Some even say that the whole country drinks nothing more than pure water.<sup>48</sup>

Centuries later, this image of the Chinese continued to inspire travelers heading to the East, following the Silk Road.

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47 Márcio Gouveia, "Roma et Barbaries: a evolução do conceito de barbárie na antiga Roma," *PhaoS: Revista de Estudos Clássicos*, 2012, n. 12 (2012), pp. 5–27.

48 Macrobioi, 5, in Lucian, *Makrobioi*. Cited in George Coedès, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et latins relatifs a L'Extreme Orient* (New York: Ares Publishers, 1977). Translation by author.

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