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THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN WORLD:

HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY, & ART

Trade, Currency, and Cosmology

The Bureaucratic Construction of the “Distant Other”

between Antonine Rome and Han China

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Chronology

Date	China	Rome
c. 1600–c. 1045 BC	Shang Dynasty	
c. 1045–771 BC	Western Zhou Dynasty	
897 BC	Enfeoffment of <i>Qin Ying</i>	
770–256 BC	Eastern Zhou Dynasty	
753–510 BC		Foundation of Rome (753 BC)
770–481 BC	Spring and Autumn Period (Ennoblement of <i>Qin Xiang</i> , 770 BC; Life of <i>Confucius</i> , 551–479 BC)	
c. 650–600 BC		Emergence of Latin city-state culture
509–27 BC		Roman Republic
403–221 BC	Warring States Period (Reforms of <i>Shang Yang</i> , 361–338 BC; Conquest of <i>Sichuan</i> , 316 BC)	Expansion in Italy (Conquest of Veii, 396 BC; Control over Latium, 338 BC; Italian Wars, 326–272 BC)
264–146 BC		Punic Wars against Carthage
247–210 BC	Reign of King Zheng of Qin (<i>Qin Shi Huangdi</i> , 221–210 BC); Unification of China (230–221 BC)	
221–206 BC	Qin Dynasty	

Date	China	Rome
215–133 BC		Wars against Macedon (215–168 BC); Seleucid War (192–188 BC); Conquest of Iberia (206–133 BC)
206 BC–9 AD	Western Han Dynasty (Reign of Emperor <i>Wu</i> of Han, 141–87 BC)	Late Republic & Civil Wars (133–30 BC); Social War (91–89 BC); Wars against Pontus and Armenia (88–64 BC)
58–44 BC		Conquest of Gaul (58–51 BC); Dictatorship of Julius Caesar (48–44 BC)
27 BC–235 AD		The Principate (Early Empire); Reign of Augustus (27 BC–14 AD)
9–25 AD	Xin Dynasty (Reign of <i>Wang Mang</i>)	
25–220 AD	Eastern Han Dynasty	Height of the Roman Empire (including the Antonine Dynasty)
220–265 AD	Three Kingdoms Period (Start of Period of Disunion)	
235–284 AD		Period of the Soldier Emperors (Crisis of the Third Century)
265–316 AD	Western Jin Dynasty	
284–602 AD		Later Roman Empire; Reign of Diocletian (284–305 AD)
304–439 AD	Sixteen Kingdoms Period	Reign of Constantine (306–337 AD); Edict of Milan (313 AD); Council of Nicaea (325 AD)
330–395 AD		Establishment of Constantinople (330 AD); Ban of Pagans (391 AD); Final Split of Empire (395 AD)
386–581 AD	Northern Wei; Western Wei and Northern Zhou	

Introduction

There is a passage in the *Hou Hanshu* that is hard to read without smiling. The kings of *Da Qin*, the chronicler reports, send a man with a bag to follow the royal carriage. Anyone with a complaint throws their petition into the bag. When the king reaches his palace, he opens the bag and considers the rights and wrongs of each case.¹ The text is describing the Roman empire, or what its compiler understood the Roman empire to be. Whether such a procedure ever existed in any Roman province is doubtful. What the passage records is the kind of administrative arrangement that a Han court historian, working in a culture where memorials to the throne were a routine instrument of governance, found it natural to imagine when describing a distant and well-governed land. The *Da Qin* of the *Hou Hanshu* should not be considered identical with Rome itself. Instead, it functions as a geopolitical projection, representing the vision of the Roman Orient as synthesized by Han bureaucratic frameworks.

Roman writers had their own version of the same problem in reverse. Pliny the Elder, attempting to explain the silk for which the *Seres* were known, described it as a kind of forest wool, combed off leaves and washed in water.² The error is total. No one who had ever seen sericulture could have written that sentence. Yet Pliny was not an obscure provincial author. He was a careful naturalist with access to imperial sources of information. The *Seres* appear in his works, and in the condemnations of silk attire by Tacitus and Seneca, primarily as a foil for exploring Roman luxury; this served merely as the catalyst for their subsequent critical discourses.³

Both empires possessed an image of the other. Those images were largely wrong, but they were wrong

¹*Hou Hanshu* 88; trans. Hirth 1885, 41–42. All citations of the *Hou Hanshu* follow Fan Ye 1965, the Zhonghua Book Company critical edition.

²Pliny the Elder, *NH* 6.54. The misidentification persists into Pomponius Mela and beyond.

³Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.33; Pliny the Elder, *NH* 6.54 and 12.84; Seneca, *Ben.* 7.9.5.

in interesting and consistent ways.

The most influential explanation for why these portraits should have taken the forms they did points to the political economies that produced them. In both Han China and Rome, official ideology mistrusted merchants and condemned private accumulation, while the actual workings of the imperial economy concentrated fiscal surpluses at the centre and generated elite demand for goods that could be obtained only through the long-distance trade that the official ideology disapproved of.⁴ Goods imported from beyond the frontier carried a prestige that domestic substitutes could not match. Their value was constituted, in part, by the foreignness of their origin. The argument is persuasive in its broad outlines, though it can be pushed too hard: not all eastern luxury imports into Rome were destined for elite display, and the share of trade conducted on the initiative of professional merchants as opposed to at imperial demand was probably larger than the agrarian-empire model assumes. Still, something like this dynamic does seem to be at work. The Han court's interest in the orderly governance of *Da Qin* and the Roman elite's interest in the moral status of silk both reflect the position of foreign goods within an internal economy of prestige.

In 166 AD a small group of travellers reached the Han court by the maritime route through Southeast Asia. They were received as envoys of the Roman king *An-tun* — a phonetic rendering of Antoninus that has been generally accepted as a reference to Marcus Aurelius. They presented ivory, rhinoceros horn, and tortoiseshell as tribute.⁵ The *Hou Hanshu* treats this as a milestone, the first direct contact with the Roman world. There are reasons for caution. The gifts are not Roman gifts; they are Indian Ocean trade goods, available at any port between the Red Sea and the South China Sea. An imperial embassy would have brought something more distinctively Mediterranean. The most plausible reading, which has been the consensus since Hirth, is that these were merchants of some kind, perhaps Alexandrians, perhaps Syrians, who had pushed far

⁴Bang 2009, 100–105. Young 2001, 174–178.

⁵Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88; trans. Hirth 1885, 42.

enough along the monsoon routes to reach the Vietnamese coast and had calculated that the formal language of tribute would secure court access otherwise unavailable to them.⁶ Whatever they were, no Roman source mentions them. The Han chroniclers recorded their arrival, processed it through the tributary framework, and waited for a follow-up that did not come.

That nothing came of it is itself a fact worth explaining.

The silence on the Roman side cannot be put down to ignorance. The travellers had returned. Word of the journey would have circulated in the eastern Mediterranean ports they had set out from. If the visit left no mark on surviving Latin or Greek literature, the explanation has more to do with what each tradition was structurally able to record. Han bureaucratic culture treated foreign contact as administrative routine: every reception of tribute, every memorial submitted, every ceremonial gesture went into the archival apparatus, both as procedural record and as evidence of the emperor's universal moral attraction. The Roman tradition was organised differently. It turned on military victory, senatorial debate, the personal achievements of emperors. A small commercial venture by anonymous traders arriving across the back door of Annam offered nothing for the Roman triumphal mode to work with.

The deeper question is why the two traditions diverged in this way at all. Part of the answer lies in the very different temporal relationships each empire had with its own existence. Yuri Pines has pointed out that Rome's unification of the western Mediterranean lacked historical or mythical precedents in the cultures it absorbed: there was no prior story of Mediterranean unity for Roman writers to draw on, and Rome's universal rule was in this sense entirely without precedent in its own region. The Chinese case was the opposite. The Qin unification of 221 BC could be presented (and was presented, even when the First Emperor declined the option) as the restoration of an "All under Heaven" (*tianxia*) that pre-imperial historiography reaching back to the Western Zhou had already imagined as the normative situation. Han historiography inherited this

⁶Birley 1987, 144–145; Hirth 1885, 173–176; de Crespigny 2007, 1.

framing. It wrote within a tradition that already had a vocabulary for unified rule, for the Son of Heaven(天子), for the moral attraction of distant peoples, categories into which something like the 166 AD record fitted automatically, however thin the actual evidence might be. Roman writers had no comparable inherited vocabulary, because their empire was not the recovery of anything; it was a comparatively recent and singular historical fact.

This does not mean Han historiography was somehow free of ideological mediation while Roman writing was full of it. Both traditions were filtered. The difference lies in the locus of the filtering. Mittag and Ye Min, in their work on Chinese historiography in the post-Han period, have shown how individual historians (Chen Shou writing as a former Shu-Han subject in the service of the Sima Jin court, Xi Zuochi defending a particular theory of legitimate dynastic succession, Fan Ye compiling the *Hou Hanshu* in the middle of the dynastic intrigue that would eventually cost him his life) each shaped their accounts of Han to fit the political needs of their own moment. The point is not that Chinese historians wrote without bias. They did not. But the Han archival apparatus that supplied them with raw material had already done a different kind of filtering upstream, automatically, by category: the arrival of foreign tribute, no matter who recorded it or what they thought of it, generated a record because the bureaucratic system required one. Roman historiography had no such upstream automation. Each writer chose what to register, and that choice was answerable to the inherited frame within which he wrote.⁷

The same divergence runs through the monetary record. Roman gold and silver coins moved east in considerable quantities, attested by hoards across South Asia and the Indian Ocean rim. Within imperial territory, these coins traded at tariffed face values that exceeded their bullion content, and the political backing of the Roman state mattered for sustaining this premium. Once the coins crossed the frontier, however, the

⁷Pines 2008, 67–69; Mittag and Ye 2008, 347–369. For the Han documentary apparatus more generally, Loewe 2006, 104–107; on the Roman tradition's organisation around military and senatorial prestige, McCormick 1986, 13.

tariff fell away and they were assessed as metal, recognised on the strength of their weight and fineness rather than the authority of their issuer.⁸ A Kushan trader could weigh an aureus and know its worth. The Han *Wuzhu* coin, by contrast, derived its value from administrative enforcement: from the legal weight standard the imperial government maintained within its own territory. Outside that territory, the *Wuzhu* was a piece of bronze of low intrinsic value and considerable bulk.⁹ It could not make the return journey. The bullion flow was, structurally, one-way.

Then there is the cosmological dimension, which is harder to summarise briefly. The doctrines through which each empire sacralised political authority were embedded in their respective ritual and institutional contexts: the resonance between Heaven and humanity (天人感應) on the Han side, the civic-contractual divinity of the Roman emperor on the other. Buddhism, which moved relatively freely along the same trade corridors during this period, did so partly because it was institutionally detached from any state.

The framework that has made this kind of comparison possible at all is comparatively recent. Until perhaps the 1990s, Sino-Roman studies meant primarily the study of contact and exchange: the silk roads, the trade objects, the textual mentions. The shift toward a structural comparison of the two empires as parallel political formations, rather than as occasional partners, has produced both the institutional approach associated with Walter Scheidel's edited volumes and the historiographical approach pursued by Fritz-Heiner Mutschler and Achim Mittag in their work on imperial self-conception.¹⁰ These approaches are not equivalent and they sometimes disagree about emphasis. The present study draws on both. The institutional comparison illuminates

⁸Harl 1996, 73–80. On the dual nature of Roman silver, which traded at tariffed face values exceeding its bullion content within the empire but functioned effectively as “certified ingots” beyond the frontiers, see Howgego 1995, 126–129. For the export of Roman precious metals as bullion to India and the East, see Howgego 1995, 102–105.

⁹Shi 2011, 50–51.

¹⁰Scheidel 2009a, 3–5. For the related but distinct emphasis on historiographical self-conception rather than institutional structures, see Mutschler and Mittag 2008, xiv–xv. On the asymmetry of temporal depth between the two empires, see Pines 2008, 67–89.

why certain kinds of contact were structurally impossible. The historiographical approach illuminates why the imaginaries each empire produced of the other looked the way they did. What the two approaches share is the recognition that the two empires were comparable in scale and in administrative ambition, and that comparing them across specific functional domains is more productive than reciting the catalogue of luxury goods that travelled between them.

This dissertation is structured around five key areas of inquiry: the construction of mutual images in geographical and historical writing; the 166 AD episode and what it does and does not establish about direct contact; the divergence between Han and Roman archival cultures; the incompatibility of the two monetary systems; and the contrast between Han cosmological and Roman civic-contractual modes of legitimating imperial authority. The man with the bag never followed any Roman emperor's carriage. The image is a Han court historian's, projected onto a territory he had never seen, working with whatever fragmentary information had reached him through Parthian traders and Central Asian intermediaries. Whether the projection tells us more about what the Han bureaucratic mind considered an ideal of governance, or about what kinds of information could and could not cross the territory between the two empires, is a question that the chapters that follow will return to. It does not, in my view, admit of a single answer.

Chapter I. Civilizational Mirrors: Geographical Definition and the Epistemology of the “Distant Other”

1.1 Dual Perspectives: Historiographical Evolution and the Reciprocal Gaze of Empires

Within the political and social context of Antonine Rome, particularly under Marcus Aurelius, Roman perceptions of the “Far East” underwent a significant shift. While Marcus Aurelius’s own *Meditations* primarily reflects an introspective preoccupation with Stoic cosmic reason, the historical realities of his reign, marked by the protracted Parthian Wars and the sustained vitality of Red Sea maritime commerce, required a heightened imperial attention to the Seres, the elusive progenitors of the silk trade.¹¹ For the Roman elite, this distant Orient functioned as more than an economic terminus for exotic luxuries; it was a conceptual space onto which moral anxieties and geographical alterity were projected. Roman geographical writers in the Antonine period began situating the Seres within a more defined geopolitical framework, moving beyond the purely mythological geography of the classical tradition.

In modern scholarship, this “Reciprocal Gaze” between the two hegemonies has evolved from the mere cataloging of trade routes into an inquiry into the construction of cultural knowledge. Current study no longer treats the silk trade as a purely material phenomenon. Friedrich Hirth, a pioneer in this philological tradition, utilized Chinese dynastic records to unveil “*Da Qin*”, a version of Rome highly idealized through the lens of Han statecraft.¹² Building upon this, contemporary comparative historians led by Scheidel have integrated these mutual perceptions into a robust framework of institutionalism and cross-cultural evolution.¹³ The implication is that by imagining a distant counterpart, both Roman empire and Han court sought to validate their own exceptionalism of the known world. This chapter adopts a discourse-oriented reading of the sources, focusing on political vocabulary, not diplomatic facticity.

¹¹Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.23 (trans. Hammond 2006).

¹²Hirth 1885, 4–30.

¹³Scheidel 2009a, 3–5.

1.1.1 Hirth's Identification of "Da Qin": From Philological Deconstruction to the Roman Orient

The empirical foundation of modern historiographical inquiry into Han-Roman relations was established by Friedrich Hirth in his 1885 seminal study "*China and the Roman Orient*". Hirth's primary contribution was to break with the vague conjectures of earlier scholarship, which often equated "Da Qin" with the whole Italian peninsula, and to subject the Chinese dynastic records to close philological scrutiny. He successfully anchored the semi-mythical construct of "Da Qin" within a concrete geographical framework, identifying it specifically as the eastern part of the Roman Empire. As Hirth explicitly stated:

"the ancient country of *Ta-ts'in* (*Da Qin*) ... 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."¹⁴

Hirth's identification gains further weight when situated within a broader Eurasian pattern of perceiving the Greco-Roman world through its Hellenized eastern provinces. Jewish sources from the Hellenistic and Roman periods consistently referred to this world as "*Yavan*" (יָוָן), a term etymologically derived from "Ionia," and subsequently extended the designation *Kittim* to encompass both the Seleucid monarchy and, in later usage, the Romans.¹⁵ Indian sources exhibit a parallel semantic trajectory. Sanskrit *Yavana* and Prākṛit *Yona*, both descending from the same Ionian root by way of Old Persian *Yaunā*, initially designated Greeks in the context of the Hellenistic successor states and continued to be applied to westerners well into the Roman imperial period.¹⁶

Hirth's geographical identification relied heavily on his meticulous deconstruction of the *Hou Hanshu* (後漢書 *Later Han Book*). By cross-referencing toponyms and calculating the distances described in the text, he resolved the spatial ambiguities inherent in trans-Eurasian maritime and terrestrial routes. He identified the capital of *Da Qin* not as Rome, but as Antioch, the administrative heart of Roman Syria. This conclusion was supported by the Chinese descriptions of *Da Qin*'s position at the western edge of the known seas and its dense urban fabric. The *Hou Hanshu* records:

¹⁴Hirth 1885, xix–xx.

¹⁵Gen. 10:2–4; Dan. 8:21. On the semantic evolution of Kittim from Kition in Cyprus to the Seleucids and Romans, see the Qumran *Pesher Habakkuk* (1QpHab). Cf. Eshel 2008, 163–169.

¹⁶Mairs 2014, 128–129.

“大秦國，一名犁鞬，以在海西，亦云海西國。地方數千里，有四百餘城”

“The country of *Ta-ts'in* (*Da Qin*) is also called *Lichien* (*Li-kin*) and, as being situated on the western part of the sea, *Hai-hsi-kuo* (i.e., ‘country of the western part of the sea’). Its territory amounts to several thousand *li*; it contains over four hundred cities.”¹⁷

The term *Hai-hsi* (country of the western sea) already encodes a specific geographical standpoint. *Da Qin* is not viewed as a Mediterranean power but as a territory lying beyond the Parthian realm. This eastward oriented geography was not fortuitous. The Parthian empire occupied the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia, and stood between Han China and the Roman Mediterranean as the principal channel through which information about the western world reached the East. The commercial routes linking the Parthian frontier with Roman Syria are well attested. Goods crossed the Euphrates at Zeugma and were forwarded to Antioch, which served as one of the empire’s main collection points for the *tetarte*, the 25 percent import duty on eastern trade. Young has argued that the Parthians did not in fact monopolise this commerce, noting that Roman merchants such as Maes Titianus traversed Parthian territory without apparent obstruction. He further observed that silk could be obtained via Indian Ocean sea routes that bypassed Parthian territory entirely, rendering any such monopoly impossible in practice.¹⁸ The geographical fact remains, however, that for the Parthians themselves the “Roman” neighbour meant first and foremost Syria and Egypt, the provinces with which they shared a direct frontier. As Hirth observed, Han informants accordingly inherited a Parthian mental map of Rome, one in which Antioch figured far more prominently than Rome itself.

Geography alone cannot account for the Han imagining of *Da Qin*. Hirth’s reconstruction reveals that the Han perception of the “Distant Other” was filtered not only through spatial mediation but also through the strategic and commercial prism of the Parthian middleman. *Da Qin* in Han sources is consequently characterized by a “civilizational intertextuality,” in which geographical reality interweaves with political projection. Hirth observed that descriptions of *Da Qin*’s political system, particularly the meritocratic appointment of rulers, functioned as a mirror for Han cultural ideals. The *Hou Hanshu* states:

¹⁷Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88. Chinese text in Hirth 1885, 99; English translation at 40.

¹⁸On the trade routes connecting the Parthian frontier with Roman Syria, see the discussion in Young 2001, 169–180, esp. 174–176.

“其王無有常主，唯賢是立。國中災異，輒更立官賢者為王，而放其故王，故王亦不敢怨。”

“The kings are not permanent rulers, but they are appointed from among the most deserving... if an extraordinary calamity occurs... the king is deposed and replaced by a new one, the one so discharged not daring to show resentment.”¹⁹

In Hirth’s view, this “invented” counterpart mirrored the Han’s own moral aspirations, transforming anecdotal frontier lore into a verifiable historical discipline. By providing this philological baseline, Hirth established the geographical parameters necessary for all subsequent comparative studies of these two “Distant Others.”

1.1.2 Methodological Shifts: From Philology to Scheidel’s Comparative Institutionalism

Sino-Roman studies changed direction around the turn of the millennium. Scheidel proposed a different approach: instead of tracking whether goods or people had crossed the distance between the two empires, he asked what it meant that the two states, without any contact, had arrived at comparable administrative solutions.²⁰ While nineteenth-century pioneers such as Friedrich Hirth were primarily occupied with identifying *Da Qin* in Chinese dynastic records, contemporary scholars have turned to a different question altogether. The work led by Walter Scheidel treats the two empires not as isolated entities occasionally linked by trade, but as parallel formations whose structural similarities merit sustained analysis in their own right. As Scheidel explains, scholarly interest in contact and exchange, in the objects and mechanisms of the transcontinental luxury trade, has long overshadowed the potential benefits of comparative analysis, an imbalance he considers emblematic of the field and difficult to justify.²¹

Scheidel further contends that only comparisons with other civilizations make it possible to distinguish common features from culturally specific developments, to identify variables critical to particular historical outcomes, and to assess any given ancient state within the wider context of premodern world history.²² His

¹⁹Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88. Chinese text in Hirth 1885, 100; English translation at 41.

²⁰Scheidel 2009a, 8.

²¹*Ibid.*, 5.

²²*Ibid.*

own contribution to the volume, “The Monopolization of Complex Society,” traces how both empires developed along similar trajectories in their management of vast populations.²³ He argues that despite the absence of direct diplomatic ties, both polities faced universal constraints of governance and arrived at comparable solutions for the extraction of resources, the maintenance of social order, and the monopolization of organized violence through bureaucratic hierarchies.

Within a comparative framework, the Han and Roman empires cease to function merely as destinations for each other’s trade or as mirrors for moral projection. They become analytical counterparts whose institutional structures can be measured against one another. By directing attention to fiscal control, military organization, and the tension between central authority and local elites, Scheidel and his collaborators have laid the theoretical groundwork for a form of macro-historical analysis that the older philological tradition, for all its achievements, could not have attempted on its own.²⁴

1.2 Intermediary Geopolitics and the “*Da Qin*” Mirror in Han Records

Geography was not the sole architect of this inter-imperial distance. Parthian middlemen actively engineered the informational void between the Han court and Rome. The Parthian empire occupied the critical stretch of territory separating the two powers, and as Hirth demonstrated through his philological inquiry, Parthian authorities had strong reasons to obstruct direct contact between the Han court and Rome in order to protect their commercial position along the overland routes. This obstruction is recorded in the *Hou Hanshu*’s account of Gan Ying’s mission in 97 AD. Upon reaching the western limits of *An-hsi* (Parthia), Gan Ying was dissuaded from crossing the sea by local mariners, who warned him that:

“海水廣大，往來者逢善風三月乃得度，若遇遲風，亦有二歲者，故入海人皆齎三歲糧。海中善使人思土戀慕，數有死亡者。”

“The sea is vast and great; with favourable winds it is possible to cross within three months; but if you meet slow winds, it may also take you two years. It is for this reason that those who go to sea take on board a

²³Scheidel 2009b, 11–13.

²⁴Scheidel 2009a, 8–9.

supply of three years' provisions. There is something in the sea which is apt to make man homesick, and several have thus lost their lives."²⁵

Whether or not the Parthians deliberately fabricated these dangers remains debated. Young has argued that no systematic Parthian monopoly over the eastern trade can be demonstrated, and that the episode of Gan Ying may have been misinterpreted in the Chinese sources.²⁶ What is not in dispute, however, is that the Parthian position between the two empires filtered the information that reached the Han court about the Roman world.

The *Hou Hanshu* itself registers the commercial dimension of this intermediary role explicitly. It records that "Their kings [of *Ta-ts'in* (*Da Qin*)] always desired to send embassies to China, but the *An-hsi* [Parthians] wished to carry on trade with them in Chinese silks, and it is for this reason that they were cut off from communication". The text further notes that those who traded between *Da Qin* and Parthia enjoyed substantial profits, observing that "their profit was ten-fold" (利有十倍).²⁷ Recent scholarship on the Indian Ocean trade suggests that actual profit margins on long-distance eastern commerce may have been considerably higher than this figure implies. The *Muziris* Papyrus, a second-century customs document from Roman Egypt, records a single shipment from India whose fiscal assessment alone exceeded 1,151 talents for three-quarters of the cargo, with actual market values considerably higher still, suggesting profit margins on the Indo-Roman trade that far exceeded the ten-fold figure noted in the Chinese source.²⁸

This rupture in direct communication meant that Han chroniclers reconstructed *Da Qin* largely on the basis of fragmented reports collected at the Mesopotamian and Parthian frontiers. In the absence of firsthand observation, the resulting portrait transformed the Roman empire into a land of exceptional prosperity and administrative integrity. The *Hou Hanshu* portrays a state where transactions are conducted honestly and "there

²⁵Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88. Chinese text in Hirth 1885, 98; English translation at 42.

²⁶Young 2001, 175–178. Young questions the reliability of the Chinese accounts of Parthian obstruction, noting that the Roman merchant Maes Titianus was able to traverse Parthian territory freely.

²⁷Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88. Chinese text in Hirth 1885, 99–100; English translation at 42.

²⁸de Romanis 2020, 211–215. The figure of 1,151 talents represents the fiscal valuation of three-quarters of the cargo of the *Hermapollon*, equivalent to roughly 6.9 million sesterces; the full cargo amounts to c. 9.2 million sesterces, which de Romanis at p. 318 rounds to "roughly 10,000,000 sesterces."

are no double prices” (其平賈，不二價), and where “the budget is based on a well-filled treasury” (國用充盈).²⁹

The text also records the monetary system of *Da Qin*, noting that “ten units of silver are worth one of gold” (以銀為錢，銀十當金一).³⁰ This ratio diverges markedly from what is known of Roman practice. Under the standard Roman monetary system, 25 silver denarii were equivalent to one gold aureus, a ratio of 25:1 rather than the 10:1 reported by the Chinese source.³¹ The discrepancy likely reflects the distortion inherent in information transmitted across multiple intermediaries. Han chroniclers, receiving their data at second or third hand through Parthian and Central Asian merchants, would have had no means of verifying the precise monetary arrangements of a state they had never visited. The compressed ratio of 10:1 may represent a garbled understanding of Roman bimetallic practice, or it may reflect local exchange rates encountered at frontier trading posts, not the official Roman standard.

This barrier persisted until a southern maritime route partially bypassed Parthian territory. According to the annals, it was not until 166 AD, the ninth year of the *Yen-hsi* period, that the “king of *Ta-ts'in* (*Da Qin*), *An-tun*, sent an embassy” via the frontier of *Jih-nan* (大秦王安敦遣使，從日南徼外來獻).³² Yet even this moment of ostensibly direct contact was marked by a gap between Han expectations and the reality of what arrived. The embassy’s offerings of “ivory, rhinoceros horns, and tortoise shell” were products typical of the Indian Ocean trade as opposed to the legendary treasures of the Roman interior. Han historians noted this discrepancy with evident skepticism, remarking that “the list contained no jewels whatever, which fact throws doubt on the tradition” (其所表貢，並無珍異，疑傳者過焉).³³ The *Hou Hanshu* actively constructs an urban topography for the empire. By detailing stone defenses and palatial networks, Han annalists wrote a

²⁹Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88. Chinese text in Hirth 1885, 100; English translation at 42–43.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Under the standard Roman monetary system, 25 silver denarii were equivalent to one gold aureus. See West 1941, 289–290; West and Johnson 1944, 86–90. The 25:1 ratio is the fiscal tariff fixed by imperial decree; by weight, the Antonine gold-to-silver bullion ratio stood at roughly 12:1. The *Hou Hanshu*’s 10:1, then, is much closer to the actual bullion ratio than to the coin tariff, and may record what gold and silver fetched against each other in frontier exchange rather than the official Roman standard.

³²Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88. Chinese text in Hirth 1885, 99–100; English translation at 40–43.

³³*Ibid.*

civilizational equal into existence. The text records a territory containing “over four hundred cities” (有四百餘城), where even city defenses are constructed with permanent materials, noting that “the walls of cities are made of stone” (以石為城郭).³⁴

Roman self-perception independently corroborated this architectural obsession. Writing under Antoninus Pius, the orator Aelius Aristides described the Roman empire as a vast network of cities, contrasting it with earlier Assyrian, Median, Persian, and Macedonian empires that had been, in his words, merely “kings of open country and strongholds” rather than rulers of civilized communities. The Han chroniclers, arriving at their portrait through entirely independent channels of information, appear to have registered precisely this quality of Roman urban civilization.³⁵

The chroniclers were particularly struck by the physical infrastructure of the Roman Orient, noting the presence of “postal stations and milestones” (列置郵亭，皆堊墍之), which Hirth identifies as a reflection of the *cursus publicus*, the maintained Roman road network. The description of the capital city further emphasizes a grandeur comparable to Chinese imperial ideals, claiming the city walls measure “over a hundred li in circumference” (所居城邑，周圍百餘里) and contain “five palaces, ten li distant from each other” (宮室有五，其間各十里).³⁶ The reference to five palaces is at first sight suggestive. Earlier Julio-Claudian construction on the Palatine Hill had produced five distinct imperial residences: the *domus* of Augustus, the *domus* of Tiberius, the *domus* of Caligula, the *domus Flavia*, and the *domus Augustana* of Domitian. By the Antonine period, however, these structures no longer stood as five separate buildings. The Julio-Claudian residences had been absorbed into the Domitianic palace complex, and what a visitor to Rome in the second century would have seen on the Palatine was a single monumental ensemble as opposed to five discrete palaces. The correspondence in the number five between the Chinese source and the older Palatine layout is therefore best treated as a coincidence rather than as evidence of accurate transmission, although a residual memory of

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Aelius Aristides, *Or.* 26 (To Rome) 93; trans. Oliver 1953, 905.

³⁶Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88. Chinese text in Hirth 1885, 99–100; English translation at 40–43.

earlier architectural divisions cannot be entirely excluded. It may reflect a genuine, if garbled, transmission of architectural information through intermediary channels.³⁷

The records also describe the interior of these palaces, claiming that they “use crystal to make pillars” (以水精為柱),³⁸ a detail that likely reflects a Chinese interpretation of the polished marble columns or glass mosaics characteristic of Mediterranean public architecture. The physical appearance and customs of the inhabitants receive similar attention. Hirth notes that the text describes a people who “cut the hair of their heads” (其人皆髡頭) and “wear embroidered clothing” (衣文繡), details that are broadly consistent with the dress and grooming practices of the eastern Roman provinces, particularly Syria and Asia Minor. The *Hou Hanshu* further emphasizes a state of domestic security and material abundance. The people are “much bent on agriculture” (人俗力田作), yet the country is filled with “gold, silver, and rare precious stones” (多金銀奇寶), including the “jewel that shines at night” (夜光璧) and “asbestos cloth” (火浣布).³⁹

These accumulated details served a recognizable function within the conventions of early Chinese dynastic historiography. The *Hou Hanshu*’s account of *Da Qin* in the “Treatise on the Western Regions” follows a fixed narrative format in which each foreign state is described according to a standard sequence of categories, including location, distances, population, products, customs, and political institutions. Inside this scheme, the portrait of *Da Qin* operates simultaneously on two levels. On one level, it provides empirical markers of a sedentary and complex society. As Hirth demonstrated, many of these markers can in fact be traced to actual features of the Roman Orient. On another level, the portrait constructs what amounts to an idealized counterpart to the Han state itself, a distant land where rulers are chosen on the basis of merit, where commerce is conducted without deception, and where the physical order of the urban landscape reflects the moral order of the polity. The *Hou Hanshu*’s description of an administrative procedure attributed to the

³⁷On the imperial residences of the Palatine Hill, see Coarelli 2012. The correspondence in the number of palaces between the Chinese source and the Palatine complex could be related but also may well be coincidental: by the mid-second century the earlier Julio-Claudian *domus* of Augustus, Tiberius, and Caligula had been absorbed into the Domitianic palace complex, so the physical reality on the ground by the time the report could have reached Han informants would not have presented five discrete buildings.

³⁸Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88. Chinese text in Hirth 1885, 99–100; English translation at 40–43.

³⁹*Ibid.*

Roman court: “As a rule, they let a man with a bag follow the king’s carriage. Those who have some matter to submit, throw a petition into the bag. When the king arrives at the palace, he examines into the rights and wrongs of the matter.” (常使一人持囊隨王車，人有言事者，即以書投囊中，王至宮發省，理其枉直。)⁴⁰

Whether or not this detail preserves an account of actual Roman administrative practice, its inclusion in the text transforms *Da Qin* from a geographical entry into a mirror in which Han chroniclers could contemplate the virtues they attributed to good governance.

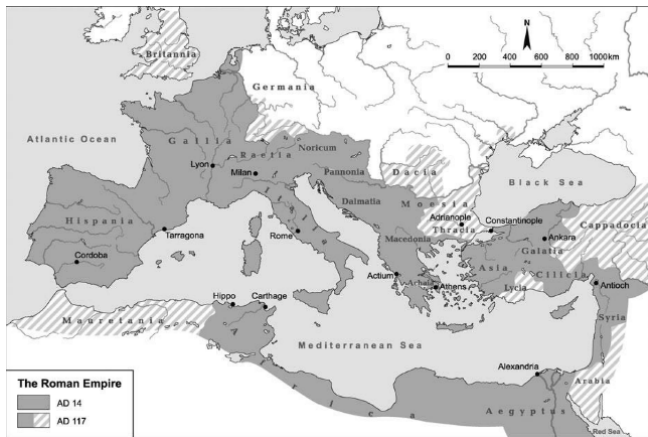


Fig. 1. The Roman Empire (c. 200 AD). Source: Scheidel 2009b, 12, fig. 1.1.

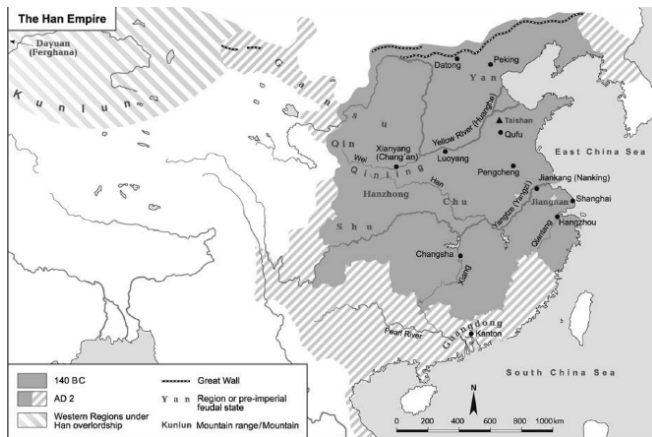


Fig. 2. The Han Empire (c. 2 AD). Source: Scheidel 2009b, 13, fig. 1.2.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

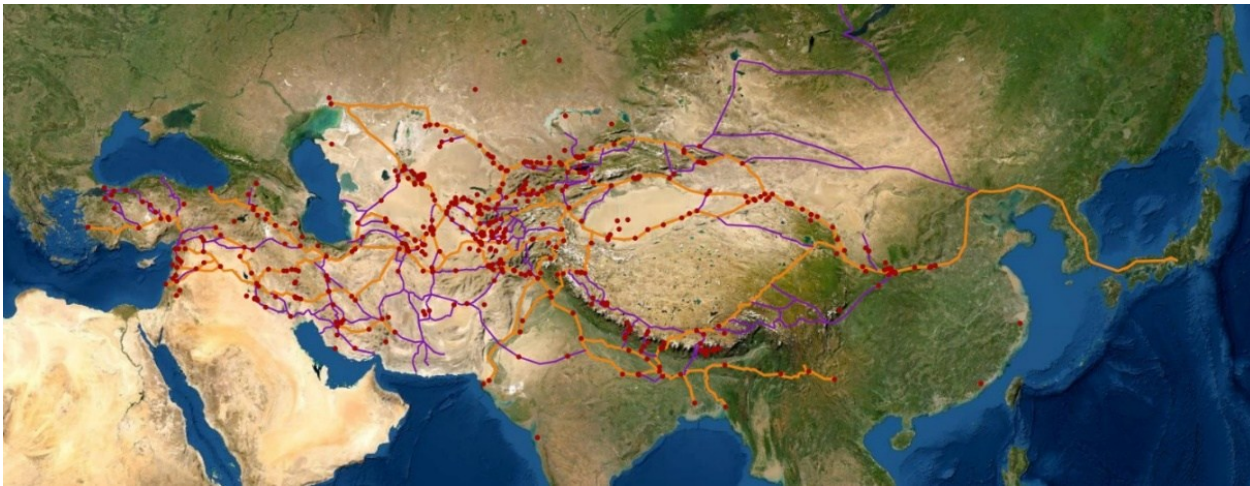


Fig. 3. The Silk Road. Source: Harvard WorldMap, <https://worldmap.maps.arcgis.com> (accessed 17/04/2026).

1.3 The “*Seres*” in the Roman Gaze: Cultural Imagination and the Synthesis of Connectivity

Within the Roman cultural imagination, the “*Seres*” existed less as a documented political entity and more as a symbolic construct defined by commodity and distance. If *Da Qin* represented for Han chroniclers a distant model of idealized governance, the Roman perception of the *Seres* was shaped by the tension between the appetite for eastern luxury and the moral anxieties that surrounded it. Silk, above all, mediated the Roman encounter with the far East, transforming a people whom no Roman had ever met into a byword for remote abundance.

1.3.1 The Social Impact of Silk

Rome knew the *Seres* almost entirely through a single commodity: silk. The connection evoked both fascination and condemnation among the Roman elite. Pliny the Elder, writing in the 70s AD, offered what became the most influential account of silk production in the Latin tradition. His description reveals the depth of Roman ignorance about the actual process, while also registering moral unease at the lengths to which Roman consumers would go to obtain the finished product. In a passage that combines geographical notation with social commentary, Pliny writes:

“Primi sunt hominum qui vocantur Seres, lanicio silvarum nobiles, perfusam aqua depectentes frondium canitiem, unde geminus feminis nostris labos redordiendi fila rursusque texendi: tam multiplici opere, tam longinquo orbe petitur ut in publico matrona traluceat.”

“The first human occupants are the people called the Chinese, who are famous for the woollen substance obtained from their forests; after a soaking in water they comb off the white down of the leaves, and so supply our women with the double task of unravelling the threads and weaving them together again; so manifold is the labour employed, and so distant is the region of the globe drawn upon, to enable the Roman matron to flaunt transparent raiment in public.”⁴¹

Pliny’s description of “forest wool”, and his subsequent misidentification of sericulture as the gathering of botanical fibers, expose how completely the intermediary barrier of the Silk Road distorted Roman knowledge of eastern production. Distance forced naturalists into conjecture. But flawed botany was not the core issue. The influx of eastern silk provoked a domestic crisis of elite morality. Seneca the Younger denounced the fabric as a garment that failed to fulfil the basic function of clothing:

“Video sericas vestes, si vestes vocandae sunt, in quibus nihil est, quo defendi aut corpus aut denique pudor possit; quibus sumptis parum liquido nudam se non esse iurabit. Hae ingenti summa ab ignotis etiam ad commercium gentibus accersuntur, ut matronae nostrae ne adulteris quidem plus sui in cubiculo, quam in publico ostendant.”

“I see there raiments of silk—if that can be called raiment, which provides nothing that could possibly afford protection for the body, or indeed modesty, so that, when a woman wears it, she can scarcely, with a clear conscience, swear that she is not naked. These are imported at vast expense from nations unknown even to trade, in order that our married women may not be able to show more of their persons, even to their paramours, in a bedroom than they do on the street.”⁴²

⁴¹Pliny the Elder, *NH* 6.54. Trans. Rackham 1942, 378–379.

⁴²Seneca, *Ben.* 7.9.5. Trans. Basore 1935, 478–479.

Seneca's complaint was not merely aesthetic. He objected that a woman wearing silk could "scarcely, with a clear conscience, swear that she is not naked," and that such garments were "imported at vast expense from nations unknown even to trade" so that Roman wives could display themselves to strangers no less than to their lovers in private.⁴³

This moral discomfort eventually found expression in formal legislation. In 16 AD, the Senate decreed that solid gold tableware should not be used and that silk clothing should not "pollute men" (*ne vestis serica viros foedaret*), as Tacitus records.⁴⁴ Roman writers also voiced concern over the fiscal cost of the eastern luxury trade, with Pliny claiming that India, the Seres, and the Arabian peninsula together drained one hundred million sesterces from the empire every year.⁴⁵ The economic and moral dimensions of this anxiety will be examined in more detail in Chapter IV.

The Seres thus occupied a peculiar position in the Roman imagination. They were not a political entity to be engaged with through diplomacy or warfare, but a category through which the Roman elite debated the consequences of their own consumption. Where Han chroniclers constructed *Da Qin* as a mirror of idealized governance, Roman writers constructed the Seres as a mirror of moral decline. In both cases, the "Distant Other" served less as an object of genuine knowledge than as a surface onto which each civilization projected its own preoccupations.

1.3.2 The Seres as a Distant Ideal

Under Marcus Aurelius (161–180 AD), the Stoic intellectual tradition that had long shaped Roman elite thought gave educated Romans a vocabulary for making sense of distant peoples. Aurelius himself does not refer to the Seres in his *Meditations*, a work concerned with personal ethical conduct rather than with geography or foreign peoples. Yet the absence of a direct reference in his personal writings does not necessarily indicate a lack of awareness at the Antonine court. Aurelius's concept of the *Cosmopolis*, the Stoic notion of a universal community governed by shared reason, provided a philosophical framework within which distant

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.33.

⁴⁵Pliny the Elder, *NH* 12.84; trans. Rackham 1945 (repr. 1960), 63.

peoples were not objects of fear or curiosity but participants in the same rational order. Roman geographical writers of the period appear to have drawn on this tradition when constructing their portraits of the Seres. The geographer Pomponius Mela offers a characteristic example:

“Seres intersunt, genus plenum iustitiae, et commercio quod rebus in solitudine relictis absens peragit notissimum.”

“The Seres [Lat., Silk People] 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.”⁴⁶

This image of “silent trade” reduced the complexity of Han commercial and administrative life to a single idealizing gesture. By placing the transaction in a deserted landscape and removing the parties from each other’s sight, the Roman account stripped the Seres of all political specificity and transformed them into a figure of primal honesty.

Imperial-era historiography of the Augustan settlement systematically subordinated this geographical distance to political purpose. Lucius Annaeus Florus, writing under Hadrian, recorded that even the Seres and the Indians had sent embassies to Rome, thereby providing what Roman writers regarded as the ultimate proof that the empire’s authority reached beyond its physical frontiers:

“Seres etiam habitantesque sub ipso sole Indi, cum gemmis et margaritis elephantos quoque inter munera trahentes, nihil magis quam longinquitatem viae inputabant—quadriennium inpleverant; et iam ipse hominum color ab alio venire caelo fatebatur.”

“...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

⁴⁶Pomponius Mela, *Chor.* 3.7.60. Latin text from the edition of Frick 1880, 69. English translation by Romer 1998. The motif of “silent trade,” in which goods are exchanged at a distance without verbal contact between the parties, is Herodotean in origin: Herodotus, *Histories* 4.196 records it of Carthaginian dealings with a Libyan people beyond the Pillars of Heracles, and the topos circulates in subsequent ethnographic writing. Its application to the Seres carries a Stoic colouring only *ex post*: the *iustitia* attributed to the Seres draws on philosophical vocabulary that becomes prominent under the Antonines, but the underlying ethnographic figure is older than Stoicism.

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.”⁴⁷

For Florus, the significance of this embassy lay not in any diplomatic outcome but in the sheer distance the envoys had traversed. Their four-year journey was itself the tribute, a confirmation that the fame of Rome had penetrated to the ends of the earth. In this rhetorical framework, the Seres ceased to be a trading partner or a source of luxury goods and became a marker of Rome’s universal reach.

This impulse to present the empire as a force of universal scope received its most articulate expression under Antoninus Pius. At some point during the reign of Antoninus Pius, the orator Aelius Aristides delivered his celebrated speech *To Rome* at the imperial court, portraying the Roman Empire as a uniquely benevolent system of governance and contrasting it with earlier empires that had been, in his words, merely “kings of open country and strongholds” rather than rulers of civilized communities.⁴⁸ Aristides’ speech was not a private philosophical exercise but a public performance delivered before the emperor himself. As such, it amounted to an official articulation of the image that Rome projected of itself. It is worth considering whether this kind of self-presentation, rehearsed and refined in the public oratory of the capital, also informed the way Roman authorities represented themselves when in contact with foreign powers. If so, the idealized portrait of Rome that reached Han informants through Parthian and Central Asian intermediaries may have owed something not only to the distortions of distance but also to the Romans’ own carefully constructed self-image.

Both empires, in the end, used the remoteness of their counterpart for parallel purposes. For Han chroniclers, *Da Qin* offered a convenient template for idealized statecraft. Roman writers, by contrast, deployed the image of the Seres not to praise foreign governance, but to diagnose their own moral decay. In neither case did the portrait bear much resemblance to the political reality of the other state. What the two traditions shared was the use of an unreachable frontier as a space for political imagination. The concrete mechanisms through which these two civilizations actually came into contact, and the commercial and

⁴⁷Florus, *Epit.* 2.34.62. Trans. Forster 1929, 349, 351.

⁴⁸Aelius Aristides, *Or.* 26 (To Rome) 93. The date of the speech is debated: the traditional dating since C.P. Jones places its delivery in 143/144 AD, while Behr argued for 154/155 AD on the basis of the Sacred Tales. Both dates fall within the reign of Antoninus Pius, so the political character of the speech as a panegyric of Antonine peace is not affected by the controversy. For the state of the debate see Pernot 2008, 175–202.

diplomatic realities that lay behind the literary constructions examined in this chapter, will be the subject of Chapter II.

1.4 Synthesis

What both empires actually consumed were fractured transmissions, heavily managed by the middlemen who separated them. A comparison with how Han records treat other western states clarifies the specificity of the *Da Qin* portrait. The *Hou Hanshu*'s account of *An-hsi* (Parthia) is largely pragmatic. While the text acknowledges Parthian urbanization and military strength, it does not attribute to Parthia the meritocratic governance, honest commerce, or architectural grandeur reserved for *Da Qin*. The idealization was selective, not formulaic. Han chroniclers did not apply the same template to every distant state. They reserved it for the one that lay beyond the reach of verification, at the furthest edge of their geographical horizon. A parallel asymmetry exists in Roman geographical writing. Roman authors had more direct commercial contact with India than with the Seres, yet this proximity did not produce confidence. On the contrary, the volume of contradictory reports reaching the capital bred suspicion. Strabo, writing under Augustus in the late first century BC and early first century AD, observed in his *Geography* that:

“However, all who have written about India have proved themselves, for the most part, fabricators, but preeminently so Deimachus; the next in order is Megasthenes; and then, Onesicritus, and Nearchus, and other such writers, who begin to speak the truth, though with faltering voice.”⁴⁹

Yet despite this professed skepticism, Roman discourse on India remained anchored in the realities of maritime trade. Merchants sailing from Red Sea ports to the western coast of India provided a stream of commercial intelligence that, however imperfect, allowed for a degree of empirical correction. The Seres, by contrast, remained entirely beyond direct observation. No Roman merchant is known to have reached their territory. Unlike the Indian traders encountered at Muziris or Barbarikon, the Seres were a silent and distant presence, known only through the goods that bore their name. This absence of direct contact allowed Roman writers to construct the Seres not as a commercial partner but as a figure of *iustitia* — a term that in Stoic

⁴⁹Strabo, *Geogr.* 2.1.9. Trans. Jones 1917, 263.

thought carried the specific meaning of natural justice, the innate disposition toward right dealing that Stoic philosophers attributed to peoples uncorrupted by the complexities of civilization.

The Parthian empire played a decisive part in shaping this condition of partial knowledge. Situated between the two powers, Parthia controlled the overland routes through which most information about the western world reached the Han court. Parthian merchants and officials had no interest in facilitating direct contact between Rome and China, and as the *Hou Hanshu* itself records, they actively obstructed it in order to preserve their commercial position. The information that did pass through was accordingly selective. Commodities circulated, but the administrative and political realities of the empire from which they originated did not. What arrived at the Han frontier was not a portrait of Rome but a collection of fragments, traders' reports, garbled toponyms, approximate distances, and descriptions of products and customs, which Han chroniclers then assembled according to the conventions of their own historiographical tradition.

The same asymmetry operated in the opposite direction. Roman knowledge of the Seres was mediated through Indian Ocean merchants and Central Asian intermediaries, none of whom had any reason to transmit a politically accurate account of the Han state. The result, on both sides, was a body of mediated knowledge in which selective factual elements were interwoven with the receiving culture's own preoccupations. Each empire interpreted the other through its own political vocabulary and for its own domestic purposes.

Chapter II. Trade, Diplomacy, and the Contact of 166 AD

2.1 Commodity Structure and Trade Framework

Ideological projections of this kind carried no cargo. The actual movement of goods across Eurasia depended on a fractured relay of middlemen and transshipment hubs. During the height of the Antonine dynasty in the mid-2nd century AD, the Han and Roman empires functioned as the economic anchors at opposite ends of the Eurasian continent. The commodity structure of this trade was not characterised by balanced reciprocal exchange. It largely consisted of luxury goods moving through a relay system of long-distance trade, constrained by high transport costs and geopolitical barriers. Goods moved predominantly from east to west, while precious metals flowed in the opposite direction as payment, a pattern attested by the significant presence of Roman coinage and silver in eastern maritime hubs. This imbalance is further corroborated by the fiscal data preserved in the Muziris Papyrus. According to the reconstruction of the cargo manifest of the *Hermapollon*, a single merchant vessel returning from the port of Muziris carried goods whose fiscal value was assessed at roughly ten million sesterces, with actual market values considerably higher still.⁵⁰ Although this evidence directly describes the scale of Indo-Roman commerce, it also points to the intensity of Antonine capital outflow toward the Far East. The inclusion of “Gangetic nard” in such manifests (a commodity originating from the Himalayan foothills and transhipped through the Ganges delta) shows how far Roman material demand reached.⁵¹ Rather than indicating direct commercial penetration into Han territory, this evidence suggests that Roman demand was connected to wider intermediary trade networks extending across South and Central Asia, networks that ultimately linked to regions associated with the production of silk.

The textual reflection of this material reach appears in the *Weilüe* (魏略), where the catalogue of Roman (*Da Qin*) products registers both genuine imports and probable misattributions. The text states:

⁵⁰de Romanis 2020, 215, 318. The “roughly ten million sesterces” figure here renders, in convenient round terms, the same shipment whose three-quarter fiscal valuation of 1,151 talents (c. 6.9 million HS) is cited at fn. 28; the unrounded full-cargo total computed from the papyrus data is c. 9.2 million HS, which de Romanis at p. 318 rounds upward to “roughly 10,000,000 sesterces.”

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 215–217.

“其土多金、銀、銅、鐵、鉛、錫……及明珠、夜光珠、真白珠、虎珀、珊瑚……碑磬、瑪瑙……翠羽、翡翠、犀、象、大龜、白馬、朱罽。”

“The land [of *Da Qin*] yields much gold, silver, copper, iron, lead, and tin... as well as luminous pearls, night-shining pearls, genuine white pearls, amber, coral... tridacna, agate ... kingfisher feathers, jadeites, rhinoceros [horns], ivory, great tortoises, white horses, and vermilion rugs.”⁵²

The last item (朱罽) likely refers to textiles dyed with Tyrian purple, the celebrated pigment extracted from the *Murex* sea-snail and used across the Mediterranean to produce luxury fabrics of a distinctive violet-red colour. While the list correctly identifies the Roman world as a source of precious metals and fine textiles, it also includes goods such as rhinoceros horns and ivory that were not Roman products but commodities transshipped through Indian Ocean networks. The *Weilüe*'s attribution of these goods to *Da Qin* reveals the limits of Chinese geographical knowledge in this period. Han and Wei chroniclers appear to have identified the transshipment point with the place of origin, a confusion that was itself a consequence of the intermediary structure of the trade. The precise channels through which *Yu Huan* obtained his information remain uncertain. The passage may reflect reports transmitted by Central Asian merchants rather than any form of direct observation. What it does confirm is that commodities associated with the Roman world circulated widely enough to register in Chinese geographical writing, even if their actual provenance was misunderstood.

The structure of this trade reflected the different production capacities of the two empires. The Han state operated centralized workshops that produced silk not only as a commercial commodity but as a medium of diplomatic exchange and official remuneration. The Roman Orient, for its part, exported manufactured goods, particularly soda-lime glassware and refined metals, that were produced in the workshops of Syria and Egypt. The driving force behind the Roman side of this exchange was elite demand for eastern luxury goods, a demand that Roman moralists viewed with alarm. Dio Chrysostom denounced the import of foreign rarities as a form of degradation, arguing that Rome's willingness to send silver across vast distances to peoples who could not even set foot on Roman soil amounted to a voluntary submission to barbarian tribute. As Peter Fibiger Bang has observed, this tension between imperial power and commercial dependence constitutes one of the defining

⁵²*Yu Huan, Weilüe* [A Brief History of Wei] 30; trans. Hill 2009.

features of agrarian empires, in which political conquest and economic vulnerability coexisted in ways that the ruling ideology could never fully reconcile.⁵³

The opening of the direct sea route to India partially circumvented the overland barriers maintained by Parthia. Lionel Casson's analysis of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* shows how the monsoon-assisted crossing of the Arabian Sea, opened to Roman shipping by the late first century AD, made it possible to reach Indian ports without depending on the overland chain that Parthian intermediaries controlled.⁵⁴ The resulting expansion of maritime commerce meant that commodities reaching the Mediterranean also served as one of the principal sources of information about distant regions. Where reliable diplomatic contact remained rare, luxury goods themselves became the medium through which both Roman and Han elites imagined and interpreted the societies at the far end of their known world.

2.2 The Diplomacy of 166 AD: A "Semi-Official" Enigma

The structural capital outflow and indirect material exchange discussed in the previous section found their most concrete historical expression in the episode recorded in 166 AD (the ninth year of the *Yen-hsi* era). The *Hou Hanshu* provides the main surviving record of this encounter:

“至桓帝延熹九年，大秦王安敦遣使自日南徼外獻象牙、犀角、玳瑁，始乃一通焉。其所表貢，並無珍異，疑傳者過焉。”

“This lasted till the ninth year of the *Yen-hsi* period during the emperor *Huan-ti*'s reign [= A.D. 166] when the king of *Ta-ts'in*, *An-tun*, sent an embassy who, from the frontier of *Jih-nan* [Annam] offered ivory, rhinoceros horns, and tortoise shell. From that time dates the [direct] intercourse with this country. The list of their tribute contained no jewels whatever, which fact throws doubt on the tradition.”⁵⁵

The episode has long attracted scholarly discussion, not least because no corresponding record survives in Roman sources. Anthony Birley, in his biography of Marcus Aurelius, addresses the event directly. He notes that Chinese annals record the arrival in 166 AD of “ambassadors” from “*Antoun*”—that is, Marcus Antoninus

⁵³Bang 2009, 100–101.

⁵⁴Casson 1984, 473–475.

⁵⁵Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88. Chinese text in Hirth 1885, 100; English translation at 42.

—bearing ivory, rhinoceros horn, and tortoise shell, and that they had come via *Annam* rather than the northern overland route. However, Birley concludes that the so-called ambassadors were in all likelihood “freelance traders, probably from Alexandria, who had acquired their gifts on their journey, rather than official envoys. There is no mention of it in Roman sources.”⁵⁶

2.2.1 The Antonine Embassy: Dynastic Identification and the Commercial Realities

The identification of *An-tun* (安敦) with Marcus Aurelius Antoninus is one of the longest-standing claims in Sino-Roman scholarship. The phonetic correspondence between the Chinese transliteration and the Roman imperial name was noted early in the modern study of these sources. Wilfred H. Schoff, in his translation and commentary on the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, explicitly equates “*An-tun*” with “Marcus Aurelius Antoninus” in his rendering of the *Hou Hanshu* passage.⁵⁷ Rafe de Crespigny confirms this identification in his *Biographical Dictionary of Later Han to the Three Kingdoms*, noting that “the name *An-tun* may relate to Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (reg. 161–180).”⁵⁸ Naming the emperor resolves almost nothing. The actual diplomatic legitimacy of the 166 AD arrival remains suspect.

On this point, the scholarly consensus is clear. Birley’s reading of the episode as a commercial venture rather than a diplomatic mission, noted above, is shared by the earlier scholarship. Hirth had arrived at a similar conclusion earlier. He observed that the items presented, namely ivory, rhinoceros horn, and tortoiseshell, were staple commodities of the Indian Ocean trade, readily available at ports along the route from the Red Sea to Southeast Asia, and bore no resemblance to the diplomatic gifts that a Roman emperor would have dispatched to a foreign sovereign. In Hirth’s view, these “envoys” were most likely Greco-Roman or Syrian merchants who, having reached the ports of Southeast Asia, adopted the guise of a tribute-bearing mission as the only practical means of obtaining an audience with the Han court.⁵⁹ Rafe de Crespigny shares this skepticism, observing that “it is unlikely this was an official embassy. More probably it was a group of enterprising

⁵⁶Birley 1987, 144–145.

⁵⁷Schoff 1912, 276.

⁵⁸de Crespigny 2007, 1.

⁵⁹Hirth 1885, 173–176.

merchants, who may not have been subjects of Rome.’’⁶⁰

Gary K. Young places the 166 AD account within a wider context of Roman merchant activity in the East. Young notes that the *Hou Hanshu* records the arrival of the mission from *Annam* (Vietnam), offering gifts of ivory, rhinoceros horn, and tortoiseshell. While scholars generally agree this was a group of traders rather than a legitimate embassy, Young emphasizes that their existence provides concrete evidence of Roman commercial reach. He points out that such activity is echoed in later records, such as the *Liang shu*, which mentions the merchant *Ch'in Lun* (秦論) arriving in Vietnam in 226 AD, and is reflected in Western classical sources like Ptolemy's *Geography*, which describes the port of *Kattigara* being visited by a Greek seafarer named Alexander.⁶¹ According to Young, since sea voyages to India were already a regular feature of long-distance trade in this period, it is not surprising that some merchants sailed further east in search of additional profit. By translating their commercial presence into the political language of the Han tributary system, these traders may have been able to obtain access to markets that would otherwise have been closed to them. Consequently, the disappointment recorded by the Han court regarding the relatively ordinary character of the gifts, sourced from the transit markets of the Indian Ocean and not from the industrial centres of the Mediterranean, may therefore reflect the essentially commercial nature of this encounter.⁶²

The phonetic identification of *An-tun* with Marcus Aurelius is sound, but the rest follows from the gifts: ivory, rhinoceros horn, and tortoiseshell are not what an imperial embassy would have carried.⁶³ Birley's reading, that these were Alexandrian or Syrian merchants who had reached the Vietnamese coast and adopted the language of tribute to obtain court access⁶⁴, which has held up since Hirth proposed something similar in 1885.⁶⁵ Rafe de Crespigny goes further and questions whether they were Roman subjects at all.⁶⁶ Young's broader survey makes the same episode look less like an outlier than it once did: the *Liang shu* (梁書) records

⁶⁰de Crespigny 2007, 1.

⁶¹Young 2001, 29.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 24–25.

⁶³Schoff 1912, 276.

⁶⁴Birley 1987, 144–145.

⁶⁵Hirth 1885, 173–176.

⁶⁶de Crespigny 2007, 1.

similar arrivals, and the port at Kattigara that Ptolemy mentions had been visited, on his account, by a Greek seafarer named Alexander.⁶⁷

The possibility that these merchants also served an informal intelligence function should not be excluded. Rome had a long history of using traders as sources of information about remote regions. Julius Caesar, preparing his expedition to Britain in 55 BC, summoned merchants from all quarters to gather intelligence about the island, though he found that even they knew little beyond the coastal regions facing Gaul. He then dispatched the officer Gaius Volusenus on a warship to reconnoitre the coast.⁶⁸ Whether the traders who reached the Han frontier in 166 AD carried any similar brief from Roman authorities cannot be determined from the surviving evidence. What can be said is that by presenting themselves in the language of the Han tributary system and invoking the name of a Roman emperor, these merchants transformed a commercial journey into what Chinese chroniclers recorded as a diplomatic event, producing one of the few moments of documented contact between the two empires.

2.2.2 The Maritime Alternative

The 166 AD envoys bypassed the Pamirs entirely. Their arrival by sea at *Jih-nan* signals a deliberate strategic circumvention of the established overland monopoly. By the second century AD, the sea route through the Red Sea and across the Indian Ocean had become the principal channel through which Roman merchants accessed eastern markets.

The overland routes through Parthian territory had never been entirely closed. As Ferguson notes, the Syrian merchant Maes Titianus sent his agents far along the silk route, as far as the Stone Tower (*Tashkurgan* in Sarikol), though they did not penetrate into China proper.⁶⁹ The overland trade was nevertheless heavily shaped by the number of middlemen through whose hands goods passed. Ferguson observes that Kashgaria, Bactria, Sogdiana, and the Parthian domains each exacted their tolls along the route, and that at no point did a single merchant carry goods from one end to the other. Roman coins might buy Chinese silk from an Indian

⁶⁷Young 2001, 24–25, 29.

⁶⁸Caesar, *BGall.* 4.20–21; trans. Edwards 1917, 205, 207.

⁶⁹Ferguson 1978, 594.

intermediary, who had in turn obtained it through Central Asian channels.⁷⁰ The result was not a continuous commercial network but a chain of separate exchanges, each governed by its own local conditions. As Ferguson puts it, “much of the trade was carried on through middlemen, and we would not necessarily expect to find Roman goods in China.”⁷¹

Raschke’s analysis of the overland silk trade reinforces this picture from the Chinese side. He argues that Chinese silk first moved north and west not as a commercial export but as a consequence of the political and military relationship between the Han dynasty and the steppe nomads, particularly the *Hsiung-nu* (匈奴). Silk was sent to the frontier as tribute, as diplomatic gifts to pacify hostile chieftains, and as part of the *ho-ch’in* (peace and friendship) system under which the Han court paid large quantities of silk, grain, and other goods to the *Hsiung-nu* in exchange for peace on the northern border.⁷² Once silk had reached the nomadic tribes, it was further disseminated through the mechanisms characteristic of steppe society: gift exchange between tribal aristocrats, plunder from raids, barter at irregular gatherings, and tribute levied by dominant tribes on weaker neighbours.⁷³ As Raschke observes, by such means “Chinese goods over a period of several years or even decades were transmitted from hand to hand from the Chinese frontier to the Danube.”⁷⁴ There was no single organized caravan route and no professional merchant class among the nomads directing this traffic. The same piece of silk might begin as a diplomatic gift from the Han emperor to the *Hsiung-nu*, pass into the hands of Sogdian traders, move through Parthian or Kushan territory, and eventually reach the merchants of Palmyra.⁷⁵

The technical basis of the maritime alternative was the exploitation of the seasonal monsoon winds. As Lionel Casson has demonstrated through his analysis of *Periplus Maris Erythraei* 57, the ship captain Hippalus was credited with being the first westerner to discover that the southwest monsoon, blowing steadily from May into October, permitted a direct crossing of the Arabian Sea to the Indian coast. Vessels departing from

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 587.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 591.

⁷²Raschke 1978, 614–618.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 609–610.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 611.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 621–622.

Cane or the Cape of Spices could reach the ports of western India with a consistently favourable wind, eliminating the need to follow the slow coastal route around the Arabian Peninsula.⁷⁶

The war with Parthia that began in 162 AD added a further incentive. J. Ferguson notes that the conflict “cut the inland silk trade” and that “it was natural that the Roman business-men should seek to make contact in other ways.”⁷⁷ The 166 AD mission fits within this context. The travellers who reached the Han frontier had taken the maritime route to its logical extension, continuing beyond India into the waters of Southeast Asia. Ferguson draws attention to a passage in the *Liang shu* which states that “merchants of *Ta Ts'in (Da Qin)* often visit *Fu-nan (Siam)*, *Jih-nan (Annam)* and *Chiao-chih (Tong-King)*, but few from those countries have been to *Ta Ts'in (Da Qin)*,” suggesting that Roman commercial activity in Southeast Asian waters, while not frequent, was sufficiently established to be noted in Chinese records.⁷⁸

The ordinary character of the gifts presented by the 166 AD envoys confirms the commercial nature of the encounter. Ferguson observes that “the gifts offered, ivory and rhinoceros horns and tortoiseshell, could all have been procured locally on arrival, or during the voyage east from India.”⁷⁹ The maritime route thus offered Roman-linked merchants an alternative to the fragmented overland chain that Raschke describes. By sailing directly to Southeast Asian ports, they could bypass not only the Parthian middlemen but also the entire relay of steppe intermediaries through whom silk had traditionally passed. The Roman and Han worlds were briefly connected not by the formal intentions of their governments but by the initiative of private merchants who exploited the maritime routes opened up by the monsoon trade and the disruption of overland channels by the Parthian war.

2.2.3 Structural Limits of Sustained Contact

That the 166 AD episode produced no follow-up reflects something about how the Han state classified what had just arrived. The Hou Hanshu treats the visit through the apparatus of the tributary system: the

⁷⁶Casson 1984, 473–475.

⁷⁷Ferguson 1978, 594.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

travellers were tribute-bearers (*gong* 貢), and a tribute-bearer's appearance functioned, within the framework, as evidence of the emperor's moral attraction (*de* 德) of distant peoples rather than as the beginning of a bilateral relationship.⁸⁰ There was therefore no reason for the Han court to send a return mission to a ruler who had already, in symbolic terms, acknowledged the superiority of the Han emperor.

The travellers themselves carried no mandate from the Roman state. They had no institutional authority to commit anyone to anything, and the Han chroniclers' remark that the gifts contained "no jewels whatever" suggests the court itself sensed something was off about the visit.⁸¹

The broader context of the later second century made sustained contact still less likely. Both empires were struck, within the same decades, by epidemic disease on a scale that severely disrupted their military and economic capacity.

In the Roman Empire, the so-called Antonine Plague broke out among troops campaigning in Mesopotamia in 165 AD, during the Parthian war of Lucius Verus.⁸² The disease spread rapidly through the army and was carried back to the western provinces by returning soldiers. Cassius Dio reported that at its height as many as two thousand people were dying each day in the city of Rome.⁸³ Galen, who attended the imperial court at Aquileia during Lucius Verus's winter quarters of 168–169 AD and observed the sick troops there directly, described the symptoms in his *Methodus Medendi*: "exanthemata appear close together over the whole body... [and] it was quite clear to an observer that, when the blood had been putrefied in those with fever, there was this remnant like ash which nature forced out of the skin."⁸⁴ Birley records that the disease was variously identified in modern times as smallpox, exanthematous typhus, or bubonic plague, and that while modern scholars may have exaggerated its role in the decline of Rome, "the effect of the plague was startling and severe, especially in the capital... and on the army, which, living in barracks, was particularly

⁸⁰Hirth 1885, 173–176.

⁸¹Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88. Hirth 1885, 100; English at 43.

⁸²Birley 1987, 149.

⁸³Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 72.14.3–4. Trans. Cary 1927. Dio composed his account several decades after the events, and the figure should be read as evocative of the scale of mortality rather than as a statistical record.

⁸⁴Galen, *Meth. Med.* 5.12. Trans. Johnston and Horsley 2011, 93–95.

susceptible.”⁸⁵ McLaughlin estimates that the Antonine Plague may have killed between 10 and 14 percent of the Roman population during its epidemic phase, with urban centres involved in maritime commerce losing as much as a quarter to a third of their inhabitants in the initial outbreaks.⁸⁶

The consequences for eastern trade were severe. McLaughlin observes that from the Antonine period onwards, ancient references to Roman involvement in eastern commerce become markedly fewer. The coin hoard evidence from India suggests that large quantities of Roman coins stopped reaching the distant East in this era, and the archaeological record from Egypt points to a sharp decline in activity at the Red Sea ports.⁸⁷ The Romans who reached China in 166 AD returned home, but the fleets of Roman ships did not follow them. The Han court waited for further contacts that never came.

What makes this picture more striking is the possibility that the same pandemic, or a closely related disease, also struck China. McLaughlin argues that the infection originated somewhere in Central Asia, perhaps when traders or nomadic horsemen came into contact with previously isolated population groups who carried the virus. Long-distance commerce then provided the chain of transmission that brought the disease to the frontier regions of both the Roman and Han empires.⁸⁸ Rafe de Crespigny, drawing on the *Hou Hanshu* annals and the *Treatise of the Five Powers*, has documented a remarkable increase in the frequency of epidemics during the reigns of Emperors *Huan* and *Ling*. Outbreaks were recorded in 151 AD and 161 AD under Emperor *Huan*, and in 171 AD, 173 AD, 179 AD, 182 AD, and 185 AD under Emperor *Ling*. Earlier episodes in the dynasty had been localised: illness in *Kuaiji* in 38 AD and 39 AD, sickness at the capital in 125 AD, an outbreak affecting the capital and the southeastern commanderies of *Jiujiang* and *Lujiang* in 151 AD

⁸⁵Birley 1987, 149–150.

⁸⁶McLaughlin 2010, 59. McLaughlin’s mortality figures lie at the higher end of a long-running scholarly disagreement. Harper 2017, 65–118, restates the maximalist case from the perspective of disease ecology, arguing that the empire’s urban density and long-distance connectivity created the conditions for a novel pathogen (probably smallpox) to spread on an unprecedented scale. Duncan-Jones 1996, 108–136, marshalled the non-literary evidence (papyri, inscriptions, mint output, building activity) to support the maximalist view; Duncan-Jones himself avoided giving a single mortality figure but noted McNeill’s estimate of 25–33% as “presumably closest to the truth” (p. 116 n. 88). The methodological case against using such proxy data as a reliable index of mortality was made by Greenberg 2003, 413–425, who argued not that the plague was unimportant but that its severity cannot be ascertained from the surviving evidentiary base.

⁸⁷McLaughlin 2010, 59–60.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 60.

— but from 161 AD onwards no particular areas are named and the epidemics appear to have spread across the empire.⁸⁹ Rafe de Crespigny notes the chronological parallel with the Antonine Plague at the western end of Eurasia, observing that “the Antonine plague, which afflicted the Roman empire for fifteen years from the mid-160s, was described by the physician Galen and is identified by Hopkins as smallpox. It is said to have been brought by troops returning from campaign in Mesopotamia, though it could, of course, have come from further east.” He cautions, however, that no clinical descriptions survive from the Chinese second century.⁹⁰

Whether these Chinese epidemics were caused by the same pathogen as the Antonine Plague cannot be determined from the available evidence. McNeill, in his study of epidemic disease and long-distance trade, has argued that when the overland and maritime routes connecting the Roman and Chinese empires were opened in the second century, the two civilisations’ previously separate disease pools came into contact for the first time. Populations at either end of Eurasia lacked immunity to the pathogens endemic at the other, and the result was catastrophic mortality of a kind that could only occur when a genuinely novel infection struck a community with no prior exposure.⁹¹ McNeill identifies two major clusters of epidemic outbreaks in Chinese records during the early centuries of the common era, the first centred on the years 161–162 AD, when a pestilence among frontier troops in the northwest killed three or four out of every ten men. He suggests that this and the subsequent epidemic of 310–312 AD may mark either a resurgence of smallpox or the arrival of measles among human populations, though the clinical evidence from the second century remains too sparse to permit a firm diagnosis.⁹²

The chronological coincidence is nevertheless suggestive. The trade routes that carried Roman merchants to the coast of Vietnam in 166 AD were the same routes along which infectious disease could travel. The opening of direct maritime links between the Red Sea and Southeast Asia, combined with the overland corridors through Central Asia, created conditions under which a novel pathogen could reach both ends of the continent within a few years.

⁸⁹de Crespigny 2007, 514–515.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

⁹¹McNeill 1976, 116–118.

⁹²*Ibid.*

The combined effect of epidemic disease on both empires was compounded by political instability. In the Roman Empire, Lucius Verus himself died in 169 AD, possibly of the plague, leaving Marcus Aurelius as sole emperor at a time when the Marcomannic Wars were placing further strain on the northern frontier.⁹³ In China, the Later Han dynasty was confronted with serious internal unrest that culminated in the outbreak of the Yellow Turban Rebellion in 184 AD. As de Crespigny has argued, the growth of faith-healing movements in the later second century was very probably related to the great epidemic. The spread of unorthodox cults offering charmed water and confession as cures for disease can be traced from the 130s AD onwards, but their proliferation accelerated markedly after the epidemics of the 160s AD and 170s AD. The most consequential of these movements was that of Zhang Jue, whose “Way of Great Peace” attracted followers across the whole of eastern China. In 184, Zhang Jue raised rebellion, and his followers, wearing yellow cloth about their heads, became known as the “Yellow Turbans.”⁹⁴ As recorded in the *Hou Hanshu*, within ten days the uprising had spread across several provinces, and the capital was shaken.⁹⁵ The epidemic outbreaks of the preceding decades had weakened the rural population and created the conditions of desperation in which movements could take hold.

In such circumstances, neither empire possessed the political stability or economic capacity necessary to sustain long-distance commercial or diplomatic initiatives. The encounter recorded in 166 AD therefore remained an isolated episode rather than the beginning of regular contact between the Roman and Han worlds.

⁹³Birley 1987, 158.

⁹⁴de Crespigny 2007, 515.

⁹⁵Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 8; de Crespigny 1989, 353–354.

Chapter III. Institutional Architectures: Bureaucracy and the Visibility of Power

3.1 Administrative Architectures: Scholar-Bureaucracy vs. Patrimonial Agency

The Han and Roman empires governed their vast territories on different principles. In the Han Empire, political authority was rooted in a highly formalized documentary bureaucracy. As noted by Michael Loewe, the exercise of imperial power during the Qin and Han periods was inseparable from the circulation of written documents that connected the imperial court with regional administrations.⁹⁶ Officials selected through the *chaju* (察舉) recommendation system were expected not only to demonstrate moral qualifications but also to possess the technical competence required to produce standardized administrative reports. This documentary culture is reflected in the excavated wooden slips from *Zoumalou* (走馬樓) in *Changsha*, which reveal a bureaucratic system built on precise quantitative accounting and durable archival routines. These archives demonstrate how the state converted complex social realities into standardized administrative language. The frequent appearance of terms such as *an* (案, files) and *die* (牒, records) in the slips confirms that even minor land disputes or changes in household registration had to undergo formal documentary processing. The Han state therefore functioned as a layered recording apparatus in which information moved vertically through successive levels of bureaucratic hierarchy.⁹⁷

Within this structure, foreign relations were also incorporated into administrative routines. Diplomatic receptions were managed by the office of *Da Honglu* (大鴻臚). According to the “Treatise on Officialdom” in the *Hou Hanshu*, the *Da Honglu* was described as being “In charge of feudal lords and the various barbarian tribes from all directions who have submitted to Han rule.” (掌諸侯及四方歸義蠻夷).⁹⁸ The institutional

⁹⁶Loewe 2006, 104–107.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 106–107.

⁹⁸Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 94. Trans. by the author, based on Chinese Text Project. The Chinese term used here, *yi* (夷), requires explanation. Unlike the single English word “barbarian,” classical Chinese employed a set of directional exonyms—*Yi* (夷) for peoples to the east, *Man* (蠻) for the south, *Rong* (戎) for the west, and *Di* (狄) for the north—collectively referred to as the *Siyi* (四夷, “Four Barbarians”). The *Zuozhuan* (左傳) commentary to the *Chunqiu* (春秋) records that “when any of the wild tribes, south, east, west, or north, do not obey the king’s commands, and by their dissoluteness and drunkenness are violating all the

foundation of this office, as recorded in the *Hanshu* for the earlier period, explicitly included specialized personnel such as *Xingren* (行人, messengers) and *Yiguan* (譯官, interpreters).⁹⁹ The function of these administrative officials was to process the information brought by foreign arrivals through established documentary procedures. Envoys arriving at the imperial court were classified within the framework of the *tianxia* (天下, “all under heaven”) order, a conception of universal sovereignty in which the Han emperor stood at the centre of the civilised world. Foreign rulers who sent tribute were understood not as sovereign equals but as peripheral participants acknowledging the moral authority of the Son of Heaven. The account of the mission from *Da Qin* recorded in the *Hou Hanshu* therefore reflects the output of administrative memorials generated by the bureaucracy in its routine handling of “tributary affairs,” rather than a purely historiographical narrative.¹⁰⁰

The Roman Empire possessed a comparable, though structurally different, conception of universal sovereignty. Roman political thought drew on the Greek concept of the *oikoumene* (οἰκουμένη, “the inhabited world”) to describe the extent and legitimacy of Roman rule. When Aelius Aristides addressed Rome in his *Oratio Romana*, he presented the empire as coextensive with the civilised world itself. The Roman Principate, by contrast, operated without a centralized documentary bureaucracy comparable in scale or institutional coherence to that of the Han Empire.¹⁰¹ The *oikoumene* implied that Roman authority encompassed the known world, with peoples beyond the frontier occupying a conceptual space not unlike that of the *Yi* in Chinese thought: acknowledged to exist, but understood as culturally inferior and politically subordinate. Both empires thus operated with universalist claims that left little room for recognising a distant power as an equal.

Where the two systems differed most sharply was in their administrative machinery. The Roman Principate did maintain a central secretariat. From the reign of Claudius onwards, the imperial household

duties of society, the king gives command to attack them.” The distinction between *Hua* (華, the civilised centre) and *Yi* (夷, the peripheral other), known as the *Hua-Yi zhi bian* (華夷之辨), was primarily cultural rather than racial: foreigners who adopted Chinese customs could in principle be absorbed into the civilised order, while Chinese who abandoned proper ritual could themselves be classified as barbarians.

⁹⁹Ban Gu, *Hanshu* 19A.

¹⁰⁰Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88.

¹⁰¹Aelius Aristides, *Oratio Romana*; cf. Oliver 1953, 896–901.

included specialised bureaux staffed initially by imperial freedmen and later by equestrian officials: the *ab epistulis* handled official correspondence in both Latin and Greek, the *a libellis* processed petitions addressed to the emperor, and the *a rationibus* managed imperial finances. As Millar has shown, these offices handled a substantial volume of business, including the reception of embassies, the drafting of replies to provincial governors, and the preparation of imperial rescripts.¹⁰² These bureaux nevertheless remained extensions of the emperor's personal household (*domus*) rather than departments of a freestanding state bureaucracy. Their authority derived from proximity to the emperor, not from institutional autonomy.

This “institutional lightness” at the centre coexisted with dense documentation at the provincial level, particularly in the Roman East. While specific provinces like Egypt (*Aegyptus*) inherited highly developed papyrological traditions and exhibited a high degree of local administrative detail, the Roman Near East also reveals a significant layer of meticulous record-keeping. Papyrological and parchment finds from the frontier garrison of Dura-Europos and the middle Euphrates, including a large number of small papyrus fragments found in the temple of *Azzanathkona*, illustrate a high level of local oversight.¹⁰³ As Millar has demonstrated, the Roman administration in Syria and Mesopotamia effectively utilized existing Hellenistic and Near Eastern archival traditions to manage local populations and military personnel.¹⁰⁴ Yet these remained localized and fragmented systems of record-keeping rather than components of a standardized, empire-wide bureaucratic network comparable to that of the Han Empire. Documentation in the Roman world was often designed to address specific disputes, fiscal issues, or military concerns, rather than to create a comprehensive and centrally integrated administrative database.

In his analysis of the Roman imperial system, Wallace-Hadrill has shown that political authority derived from personal proximity to the ruler rather than from an abstract institutional framework.¹⁰⁵ This system of governance relied heavily on the *Amici Caesaris* (Friends of Caesar) and equestrian administrators whose authority derived from their personal relationship with the emperor. The correspondence between Pliny the

¹⁰²Millar 1977, 213–228.

¹⁰³Silk and Welles 1934, 295–303.

¹⁰⁴Millar 1993, 445–455.

¹⁰⁵Wallace-Hadrill 1989, 63–65.

Younger and Emperor Trajan demonstrates the informal character of this system, where even crucial administrative permissions were resolved through personal letters that prioritized individual relationships over standardized bureaucratic protocols. For instance, when Pliny requested a leave of absence and permission to erect an imperial statue, Trajan's response prioritized the personal bond rather than formal procedure:

"You have given me many reasons, as well as every official explanation, for your application for leave of absence, though I should have been satisfied with the mere expression of your wishes. [...] You have my permission to set up my statue in the place you have chosen for it; I am generally very reluctant to accept honours of this kind, but I do not wish it to seem that I have put any check on your loyal feelings towards me."¹⁰⁶

This appeal to the "mere expression of your wishes" and the preservation of "loyal feelings" illustrates a state that functioned through personal reciprocity and local mediation, rather than through the kind of vertically integrated documentation that characterised the Han system.

The underlying structure of Roman administration has been described by Richard Saller as a network of "asymmetric patronage relationships."¹⁰⁷ Within this network, the emperor acted as a universal patron who mediated access to resources, legal status, and honours. As Saller observes, political authority was not an abstract institutional force but a personal commodity; the *Princeps* functioned as the apex of a vast web of social obligations (*officia*) and favors (*beneficia*).¹⁰⁸ Because authority was distributed through these personal channels rather than through fixed institutional offices, the Roman state was less likely to document peripheral interactions as a matter of routine than its Han counterpart.

The "institutional lightness" of the Empire remained a defining characteristic. Peter Garnsey has pressed the point further. He notes that the Roman state possessed only a skeletal number of specialized administrative departments, even in existential areas such as the food supply (*annona*).¹⁰⁹ In the face of chronic grain shortages, the imperial response was often reactive, relying on the personal initiative of the emperor and the

¹⁰⁶Pliny the Younger, *Letters*; trans. Radice 1969, 181.

¹⁰⁷Saller 1982, 11–15.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 15–20.

¹⁰⁹Garnsey 1988, 218–226.

mobilization of local elites through civic munificence (*euergesism*) rather than a permanent civil service. As recorded in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* regarding the crisis under Antoninus Pius, the emperor addressed the shortage not through an administrative mandate, but by personally funding the relief:

“The biographer of Antoninus Pius claims that the emperor ‘relieved a scarcity of wine and oil and wheat with loss to his own private treasury, by buying these and distributing them to the people free’.”¹¹⁰

This patrimonial logic meant that state intervention often took the form of a personalized act of patronage. Even where local archives and administrative bureaux existed, they remained dependent on the emperor’s household and on provincial initiative rather than on a unified bureaucratic hierarchy. For the Roman administration, distant commercial or diplomatic contacts, such as the arrival of an envoy, did not necessarily trigger a formal archival process unless the matter required the direct, personal attention of the Princeps.

3.2 Patterns of Control: Administrative Integration and Frontier Governance

The clearest test case for this divergence is frontier governance: where Rome relied primarily on military surveillance and client-state arrangements, the Han administration systematically absorbed peripheral territories into its administrative hierarchy. In the case of the Han Empire, frontier policy was closely connected with the administrative logic that structured the empire internally. As noted by Yu Ying-shih in *The Cambridge History of China Volume 1: The Ch’in and Han Empires*, relations with external peoples were often approached not as a distinct field of diplomacy but as an extension of imperial administration.¹¹¹

This tendency is visible in the Han practice of establishing commanderies in newly incorporated frontier regions. According to the geographical treatise of the *Hanshu*, the frontier territories were systematically integrated into the empire’s standardized demographic and administrative registers. Rather than relying on indirect client-state relationships, the Han bureaucracy processed the distant southern periphery using the exact same metrics applied to the interior provinces. For *Rinan* commandery (日南郡), situated at the empire’s

¹¹⁰Garnsey 1988, 225; cf. SHA, Ant.Pius 8.11, cf. 9.3.

¹¹¹Yu 1986, 381–383.

southernmost extreme, the text records:

“日南郡.....戶萬五千四百六十，口六萬九千四百八十五。縣五：朱吾，比景，盧容，西卷，象林。”

“*Rinan* Commandery... Households: 15,460. Population: 69,485. Counties: five (*Zhuwu, Bijing, Lurong, Xijuan, Xianglin*).”¹¹²

The significance of this entry lies in its bureaucratic nature. By subjecting a remote frontier to precise quantitative accounting down to the single digit of its population, and dividing it into specific sub-county units, the Han state transformed geographic distance into an administrative reality governed by the same principles as the central plains.

This same bureaucratic logic extended to foreign relations. Because frontier interactions were processed through administrative institutions, they were also systematically recorded. As Mark Edward Lewis has noted, the Han operated as a “text-based state” that relied heavily on standardized imperial record keeping and official documents.¹¹³ Consequently, the arrival of foreign envoys generated an extensive documentary trail. Foreign missions were transformed into administrative events embedded within the state’s information system.

The Roman Empire did not work this way. Rather than systematically integrating peripheral territories into a uniform administrative hierarchy, Roman policy relied on a combination of military presence and indirect political control. As Benjamin Isaac has claimed, Roman eastern frontier behaviour operated less through a coherent strategic system than through military presence and internal policing duties.¹¹⁴

In the Levant and the Near East, Rome prioritized the maintenance of local rulers and semi-autonomous caravan cities over direct annexation. Fergus Millar’s work on the Roman Near East has shown that during the early Principate this network of client kingdoms and cities like Palmyra retained significant internal autonomy while acknowledging Roman supremacy.¹¹⁵ The Roman state acted as a “negotiating structure,” prioritizing fiscal extraction and security over the systematic documentation of local affairs. Consequently, long-distance commerce with India and the Seres was conducted primarily by private merchants operating outside the

¹¹²Ban Gu, *Hanshu* (Book of Han) 28. See also Zhou 2006, 439–440. Trans. by the author.

¹¹³Lewis 2007, 51–53.

¹¹⁴Isaac 1992, 372–378.

¹¹⁵Millar 1993, 324–328.

framework of formal state diplomacy. McLaughlin notes that Roman military commanders, recognizing the mobility of traders in the East, “began to use these men as agents in their diplomatic and military designs,” tasking them with intelligence gathering and the delivery of dispatches to Eastern courts.¹¹⁶ The Han bureaucratic apparatus mandated the conversion of every foreign contact into a formal administrative record. This extensive paper trail was subsequently synthesized by court historians such as Sima Qian, who utilized his direct access to the imperial archives to construct the official historical narrative of the empire.¹¹⁷

The Roman system, by contrast, allowed trans-regional interactions to remain embedded within fragmented commercial networks. The pattern is partly historiographical: Roman historians tended to privilege high politics and military narrative over commercial or exploratory matters. This also explains why encounters that appear as monumental diplomatic milestones in Han records appear only as fragmentary, unofficial traces within the Roman literary tradition.

3.3 Archival Culture and Historical Memory

The divergence in documentation between the two empires cannot be explained simply by differences in administrative scale. The contrast was closely related to how each empire produced, preserved, and ultimately interpreted written records. Understanding the relative “invisibility” of certain trans-regional contacts therefore requires examining how information moved through different layers of evidence, ranging from local administrative documentation to the literary traditions that later shaped imperial historical narratives.

In the Han Empire, the abundance of documentary records was closely connected to the ideological functions of the bureaucratic state. While the system generated large numbers of written reports, these documents were not necessarily neutral descriptions of events. Frontier officials reported to the court within a political environment in which administrative success and imperial legitimacy were closely linked. The recording of tributary missions, including those attributed to *Da Qin*, did more than transmit information. It

¹¹⁶McLaughlin 2010, 120–122.

¹¹⁷Lewis 2007, 214–216.

demonstrated that distant peoples acknowledged the authority of the emperor. Documentary reporting could therefore function as empirical confirmation of the Mandate of Heaven, and reports submitted by local officials carried an implicit rhetorical dimension, since they could enhance the reputation of officials responsible for frontier administration.¹¹⁸

This institutional environment also shaped the way in which information entered the official historical record. Court historians such as Ban Gu and Sima Qian were themselves part of the imperial bureaucracy and had direct access to archival materials preserved within the central government.¹¹⁹ As a result, bureaucratic reports could be incorporated relatively easily into official histories. Through this process, information originally produced for administrative purposes was transformed into historical narrative, allowing even peripheral diplomatic encounters to appear as meaningful events within the broader story of imperial authority.

The Roman situation, by contrast, presents a striking paradox: the empire could generate extremely detailed administrative records while leaving comparatively little trace of such information in its surviving historical literature. As Naphtali Lewis has shown in his study of Roman Egypt, the provincial administration was capable of producing documentation of remarkable precision. The papyri preserved in the dry climate of the province include detailed census declarations, tax receipts, and shipping records. One well-known example is the system of *kat' oikian apographai* (house-by-house registrations), conducted at regular fourteen-year intervals and recording the composition of households in extraordinary detail.¹²⁰ This material confirms that Roman administrative practice could penetrate deeply into everyday social and economic life. Lewis notes that such papyri reached scholars principally through the rubbish mounds of ancient settlements, where official documents of every kind were discarded alongside private papers. This points to the volume of documentation

¹¹⁸Cf. Yu 1986, 395–397; Lewis 2009, 122, 126–129.

¹¹⁹Loewe 2006, 24, 31, 107. Ban Gu gained access to the central archives when Emperor Ming appointed him to the imperial library and later to the Orchid Terrace; see de Crespigny 2007, 6–7.

¹²⁰Lewis 1983, 156–158.

produced, not to any deficiency of archival intent.¹²¹

The existence of systematic archival structures within Roman Egypt has been demonstrated by W. E. H. Cockle, who identified a multi-tiered network extending from local notarial offices (*grapheia*) to public record offices (*bibliothekai demosion logon*) in the nome capitals, and ultimately to central repositories in Alexandria, including the two separate deposit-registries, the *Nanaion* and the *Hadrianeion*.¹²² Through a rigorous registration process (*katachorismos*), these institutions ensured that core administrative data, including census declarations and property abstracts (*diastromata*), were centrally stored, regularly updated, and accessible for long-term reference.¹²³ This archival system served not merely short-term fiscal purposes but constituted the institutional backbone of Roman provincial administration.

This difference in archival practice had significant consequences for historical memory. As Fergus Millar has demonstrated, surviving Roman historical narratives were shaped primarily by the political concerns of the senatorial elite rather than by the routine documentation generated in provincial administration.¹²⁴ Roman historians drew principally on political correspondence, speeches, and accounts of military campaigns. The substantial body of commercial and administrative knowledge produced by provincial officials rarely entered these narratives, with the result that a large volume of information about trans-regional contacts existed within the empire's documentary record without ever entering its canonical historical tradition.

A related gap deserves attention. The Roman state lacked a systematic practice of collecting and integrating strategic intelligence about regions beyond the imperial frontier. As Benjamin Isaac has argued, Roman frontier policy lacked a formalized “grand strategy”; rather than reflecting systematic long-term planning, Roman literature offers little evidence that imperial authorities subjected their military dispositions

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 3–5.

¹²²Cockle 1984, 110–117.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 122.

¹²⁴Millar 1977, 203–206.

to the discipline of broader political goals.¹²⁵

Archaeological evidence illuminates the administrative capacity of the intermediary powers themselves. Excavations at the Arsacid royal centre of Old Nisa have yielded more than 2,700 Parthian *ostraca* (inscribed pottery fragments), recovered from the Northern and Central Temple and Palace complexes. Written in a variant of Aramaic script, these documents attest to a Parthian bureaucracy capable of recording economic activities, genealogical information, and the administration of large-scale storage facilities.¹²⁶ While the *ostraca* primarily document agricultural management and fiscal storage, they confirm that the Parthian state possessed the administrative literacy necessary to process and archive information systematically. Supported by this robust institutional capacity, the Parthian state effectively managed its geopolitical advantage. As McLaughlin has observed, Parthian authorities successfully maintained their intermediary position by controlling the outward circulation of geographical knowledge about the routes connecting east and west.¹²⁷ The account in the *Hou Hanshu* of the envoy Gan Ying's frustration at Mesene in 97 AD illustrates how this management of information operated in practice: Parthian mariners discouraged further travel by exaggerating the dangers of the sea crossing, discouraging direct contact and preserving the commercial monopoly that depended on it.¹²⁸

The contrast between Han and Roman archival practice was not, in the end, about bureaucratic capacity. It was about what each system treated as worth recording. Lendon has shown that Roman imperial rule was embedded in an honour-based social logic in which loyalty to the emperor took the form of competitive civic virtue, celebrated and commemorated through public inscription, acclamation, and ceremonial display.¹²⁹

¹²⁵Isaac 1992, 372–378.

¹²⁶Livshits and Pilipko 2004, 140–180.

¹²⁷McLaughlin 2010, 122–123.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 124–125.

¹²⁹Lendon 1997, 172–175. Lendon argues that imperial rule “put down roots in two of its subjects’ strongest emotions, *philotimia*, the lust for honour, and civic patriotism,” such that loyalty to the emperor became an honourable virtue competed in by civic notables across the empire.

Military victory, above all, served as visible proof of an emperor's fitness for rule. McCormick has shown that the *mystique* of imperial triumph became a structural feature of the Augustan principate from its earliest years: the emperor's victories were not merely celebrated events but proof of his cosmic suitability for power.¹³⁰ Roman historical writing was shaped by this same logic. Tacitus, Cassius Dio, Herodian: their narratives are organised around military achievement, senatorial conflict, and the reputational fortunes of individual emperors because those were the events the system itself treated as significant.

The practical consequence of this ideological orientation is visible in the treatment of the Antonine eastern frontier. The Parthian wars of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (162–166 AD) produced no decisive conquest: the campaigns ended in a negotiated settlement rather than the subjugation of Parthia, and the victories celebrated on imperial coinage—*Armeniacus*, *Parthicus Maximus*, *Medicus*—advertised military achievements whose strategic depth was considerably more limited than these titles implied.¹³¹ A Roman historical tradition organized around triumphal validation had little incentive to record the commercial intelligence that filtered back from these frontier zones, or to preserve accounts of distant peoples and polities that lay entirely beyond the reach of Roman military action. The arrival of merchants from the eastern sea routes, the reports of Parthian geography, the fragmentary information about the Han world that reached the Roman frontier, all passed through the same Mediterranean literary culture that had been structured, from the Augustan period onwards, to commemorate victory and overlook everything else. This structural selectivity, rather than any deliberate suppression, explains why encounters that generated detailed administrative records in Han China left so little trace in Roman historical writing.

¹³⁰McCormick 1986, 13.

¹³¹Mattern 1999, 194–196.

Chapter IV. Monetary Systems, Iconography, and Bullion Flows

4.1 The Convergence of Constraints: Mechanisms behind the Unidirectional Flow of Bullion

“Minimaque computatione miliens centena milia sestertium annis omnibus India et Seres et paeninsula illa imperio nostro adimunt: tanti nobis deliciae et feminae constant. quota enim portio ex illis ad deos, quaeso, iam vel ad inferos pertinet?”

“And by the lowest reckoning India, China and the Arabian peninsula take from our empire 100 million sesterces every year, that is the sum which our luxuries and our women cost us; for what fraction of these imports, I ask you, now goes to the gods or to the powers of the lower world ?”¹³²

The passage is Pliny the Elder’s; it represents the most explicit Roman quantification of the eastern trade deficit and opens the analytical question this chapter pursues: why did precious metal flow consistently eastward rather than returning westward in equivalent form?

Rome and the Han Empire operated under different monetary and fiscal logics. Their interactions along the Silk Road exposed the narrow limits of compatibility between the two systems. The Roman monetary system, particularly under the Antonines, rested on the circulation of gold and silver coinage whose value rested on both metal content and the political backing of the Roman state. The combination allowed it to circulate even beyond the empire’s direct control, since the metal could be assessed independently where the political backing did not reach. These aurei and denarii served not only as units of account but also as stores of value, accompanying legions and trade goods eastward.¹³³

The fundamental differences in fiscal structures between the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire have been quantified and confirmed by recent research. Alfani, Bolla, and Scheidel point out that the Han Dynasty’s fiscal collection was more stringent, with an Inequality Extraction Ratio (IER) as high as 80%, while the Roman Empire’s rate was lower at 69%. This difference is also reflected in the direct fiscal burden borne by

¹³²Pliny, *Natural History* 12.84, trans. Rackham 1945 (repr. 1960), 63.

¹³³Scheidel 2009c, 170–178.

subjects: land taxes and poll taxes in the Han Dynasty accounted for approximately 10% of the income of ordinary farmers, while the fiscal burden in Rome was estimated at only 5% to 7% of the empire's total output, a more moderate tax burden than in the Han Dynasty.¹³⁴

This centralized institutional framework allowed the Han Dynasty's state apparatus to more directly concentrate economic surpluses within the political hierarchy. Income distribution data tracks the same divergence: the wealthiest 1% of the population in the Han Dynasty held 26% of total income, while the wealthiest 1% in Rome held only 19%. This institutional structure dictated the use of high-value assets, favouring the storage and redistribution of precious metals within the political system rather than long-distance market transactions. The Roman Empire benefited from a more decentralized elite and a Gini coefficient of 0.46, while the Han Dynasty was characterized by higher overall inequality, with a Gini coefficient as high as 0.48.¹³⁵

The Han Dynasty economy relied heavily on bronze coins, characterized by relatively light weight but also low value. Their low value and large quantity resulted in excessively high transportation costs, making them unsuitable for inter-regional trade. To a merchant on the Pamir frontier, a stash of *Wuzhu*(5-zhu) coins represented a logistical paradox, whose physical mass often outweighed the very value it sought to settle.¹³⁶ During the Han Dynasty, these bronze coins primarily functioned through the standardization of laws and regulations and administrative enforcement. Once outside the Han Dynasty's jurisdiction, the monetary function of these bronze coins significantly diminished.

Under these conditions, trade along the Silk Road lacked a unified monetary system. Instead, it functioned more like an exchange zone, where goods circulated more easily than currency across regions. Silk, spices, and other high-value goods flowed widely, while monetary instruments struggled to circulate. Transactions therefore had to be settled in a form of value widely accepted across different political environments. Precious metal bullion fulfilled this role. Gold and silver, particularly from the Roman side, provided a medium of exchange that did not depend on local institutional validation. The eastward flow of bullion can therefore be

¹³⁴Alfani, Bolla, and Scheidel 2025, 1–5.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*

¹³⁶Scheidel 2009c, 140–155.

understood as the result of structural differences between the two systems, rooted in the fundamental distinction between metalist and cartalist monetary traditions.¹³⁷ One system held a currency that could be assessed by its metal beyond any imperial frontier; the other held a currency whose value rested on jurisdictional enforcement and so could not cross that frontier at all. The asymmetry was settled, by default, in Roman bullion flowing east, since no Han monetary instrument could flow west to balance the account.¹³⁸

4.1.1 Structural Divergence and Exchange Capabilities

The technical foundation of the Antonine monetary system rests on the parameters established by Nero's reform of 64 AD, which remained in force throughout the period treated here. After this reform the aureus was struck at 1/45 of a Roman pound, approximately 7.27 grams, at a fineness above 99 percent. The denarius was struck at 1/96 of a Roman pound, approximately 3.41 grams, at a fineness of approximately 93 percent. These metrological values define the physical instrument through which the Antonine state encoded its monetary authority.¹³⁹ Roman denarii possessed intrinsic geographic mobility. In the Roman Empire, especially from the Augustan period onward, gold and silver coins formed the core of the monetary system. As Kenneth W. Harl has shown, the denarius functioned as a central "link coin" within a broader structure of denominations.¹⁴⁰ These coins were produced with relatively stable weight and high purity. The aureus retained a fineness above 99 percent throughout the Antonine period, while the denarius was struck at a more variable standard that nevertheless held above 80 percent during these decades. Within imperial territory, the political backing of the state mattered: Roman silver traded at tariffed face values that exceeded its bullion content. Outside that territory, however, the tariff fell away, and the coin was assessed as metal alone. Because of the consistency of weight and fineness, Roman coins could be accepted in markets where imperial authority did not extend, evaluated as bullion of fairly predictable quality. In regions such as the Kushan Empire or within the Indian

¹³⁷For the classical formulation of the state theory of money, see Knapp 1905, 10, 20–22.

¹³⁸For the theoretical foundation of this cartalist monetary logic in early China, where money was conceived primarily as an artifact of state authority rather than a commodity with intrinsic exchange value, see von Glahn 1996, 24–25.

¹³⁹For the metrological standards established by Nero's reform of 64 AD, see Harl 1996, 90–91; on the purity of the aureus, see Harl 1996, 73–80.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 73–80.

Ocean trade network, Roman coins were often used for their bullion content rather than for their imperial imagery. This made them easier to use in long-distance exchange, since they could be evaluated without reference to Roman institutions.¹⁴¹

In these regions, Roman coinage did not circulate as official currency, but was treated as bullion and incorporated into local monetary practices.¹⁴² The Parthian and later Kushan authorities issued their own gold coinage, often adapting designs from Hellenistic and Roman precedents, thereby creating a bridge between Mediterranean and Central Asian exchange networks. Through this process, Roman precious metal was reworked into locally recognizable forms of value, allowing it to move further east into territories such as Bactria and Gandhara, beyond the limits of Roman political control.¹⁴³

The numismatic evidence for bullion flow is supported by the archaeological record of Mediterranean commodities in Southern and Western India. At sites such as *Arikamedu* and along *the Gujarat* coast, Roman amphorae used for the transport of wine, olive oil, and garum provide a material indication of the scale of exchange that required bullion payments.¹⁴⁴ Of particular relevance is the widespread occurrence of local imitations of Roman goods. The discovery of imitation Roman bronzes at *Kolhapur* and *Rouletted Ware* on the east coast suggests that Roman material culture, like its coinage, underwent a process of reinterpretation in local contexts. These objects were no longer used as imported goods alone, but served as models for local production, reflecting a shift from direct consumption to adaptation. A similar pattern can be observed in the use of Roman gold, which functioned not only as currency but also as stored wealth or ornamental material in transregional exchange.

The situation in China followed a different trajectory. During the Western Han period, gold still held a recognized position as a high-value medium. As *Sima Qian* records in the *Shiji*,

¹⁴¹Howgego 1995, 126–129, on Roman coinage as falling between a pure token currency (whose face value was “simply what the government said it was”) and a “certified ingot” valued for its metal content, and on the export of Roman gold and silver coin beyond the frontier as bullion. On the specific patterns of export of pre-reform denarii to India and to “Barbaricum,” see *Ibid.*, 102–105.

¹⁴²Harl 1996, 314.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁴⁴Ball 2016, 141–145.

“金有三等，黃金為上，白金為中，赤金為下”

“At present there are three types of metal in use: gold, which is the most precious; silver, which ranks second; and copper, which is third.”¹⁴⁵

Gold in this context was used in substantial transactions and as a store of state wealth, particularly within official and elite circuits. It did not, however, give rise to a structured polymetallic currency system comparable to that of Rome; it remained closely tied to state control and largely absent from routine market exchange. *Emperor Wu*’s introduction of the “white metal” (白金 *Baijin*) issues, which alloy coins of silver and tin assigned high nominal values, thus represents the most direct attempt to extend this system into a broader denomination structure.¹⁴⁶ The coins were withdrawn after limited circulation, demonstrating that nominal valuation by imperial decree was insufficient to generate the market trust necessary for sustained use.

After the monetary disruptions of the Wang Mang interregnum (9–23 AD), the Eastern Han restored the *Wuzhu*(5-zhu) coin as the standard denomination. As Shi Junzhi has shown, while the coin’s circulation by this period relied heavily on legal regulation, it did not operate as pure administrative fiat. Its credibility remained fundamentally staked on maintaining a physical weight standard, a principle already established by the deliberate over-weighting of the earlier *Shanglin Sanguan* issues. This hybrid nature, legal enforcement backed by physical mass, made for a stable and functional internal currency, well suited to an agricultural economy organized around local markets and state redistribution.¹⁴⁷ It did not, however, produce a currency capable of circulating in the commercial environments of Central Asia, where exchange operated purely by bullion assessment and where Han administrative authority to enforce nominal values was absent.

Gold meanwhile retreated further from routine market use and became confined to elite storage and state disbursement. Despite its declining physical velocity, gold persisted as the ultimate unit of account and a benchmark for high-value measurement within the Han fiscal hierarchy. The traditional ratio, one *jin* (斤, approximately 250g in Han measure) of gold to 10,000 bronze coins, continued to serve as a conceptual anchor for the monetary system, even as the actual market exchange of the two became increasingly rare. This

¹⁴⁵*Sima Qian*, Records of the Grand Historian, *Han Dynasty II*. Trans. Watson 1993, 69.

¹⁴⁶Compilation Committee of the Dictionary of Chinese Coins 1998, 629.

¹⁴⁷Shi 2011, 136–147; 232–235.

structural role evolved further as the system transitioned into the *Jin* (晉) period, when the most commonly used unit for gold shifted from the catty (斤 *jin*) to the ounce (兩 *liang*), and the price of a single ounce ranged from 6,250 cash to as much as 10,000 cash. In this sense, gold functioned as a “ghost currency”: it provided a standard by which the debasement or stability of bronze coinage could be measured, yet it was physically absent from the hands of the merchants who facilitated trans-regional trade.¹⁴⁸ What remained was a monetary system with no practical instrument for long-distance trade settlement. Bronze coins were too heavy relative to their value; gold was institutionally sequestered. Transactions across Eurasia therefore required a medium that could be recognized independently of any single state’s authority.

4.1.2 Structural Limits and the Absence of Han Coins in the West

The absence of Han coinage in the Mediterranean archaeological record, set against the presence of Roman coinage across South and Central Asia, is a well-documented asymmetry that cannot be explained by distance alone. It reflects the specific institutional and material constraints that governed each monetary system’s capacity for long-distance circulation.

The fundamental limitation lay in how the *Wuzhu* coin derived its value. As Shi Junzhi has demonstrated, its acceptance rested on legal enforcement rather than on intrinsic metal content.¹⁴⁹ Within Han administrative territory, this arrangement functioned; beyond it, the coin’s credibility had no institutional basis. Merchants operating in Sogdiana or the Indian subcontinent possessed no mechanism for verifying or underwriting its value, and there was no equivalent to the weight-and-fineness assessment that made Roman precious metal usable across different political jurisdictions. The material problem compounded the institutional one: bronze coinage carried low value relative to its physical weight, making bulk transport across the distances involved in Silk Road exchange prohibitively expensive.¹⁵⁰ Roman gold and silver, by contrast, formed part of a wider trans-regional monetary framework built around precious metal standards. In the Hellenized markets of Central Asia, Roman coins could be received and evaluated as bullion, entirely independently of Roman

¹⁴⁸Peng, trans. Kaplan 1994, 202.

¹⁴⁹Shi 2011, 50–51.

¹⁵⁰Scheidel 2009c, 154.

political authority.¹⁵¹ Han bronze coinage offered no equivalent convertibility.¹⁵²

The scale of elite Han purchasing power makes this absence all the more striking. Despite official sumptuary laws restricting merchants from wearing prestigious fabrics, the political elite mobilized considerable resources to acquire western luxury goods. Ban Gu's letter to his brother records the transaction in direct terms:

“竇侍中前寄人錢八十萬，市得雜罽十余張也”

“The Palace Attendant Dou [Dou Xian] previously sent a man with 800,000 coins, who then purchased more than ten pieces of variegated woollen tapestries.”¹⁵³

The sum is extraordinary by any standard measure of Han wages and commodity prices. Yet the mobilization of this purchasing power produced no equivalent westward movement of coins. The logistical cost of transporting bronze coins in that quantity across the Pamirs was simply prohibitive; at frontier markets, the value held in Han coinage was converted instead into high-density commodities, principally silk, which continued westward in the coin's place. Hildebrandt's characterization of silk as a “compensatory currency” captures this function accurately: it provided a standardized, portable unit of value where bronze coinage could not.¹⁵⁴

The textiles acquired through such transactions were not always what Han buyers understood them to be. Liu Xinru has shown that many “western” luxury goods reaching the Han court were Kushan reworkings of Han plain silk, which were unravelled, re-dyed, and rewoven with Hellenistic motifs before being sold back eastward as prestige imports.¹⁵⁵ The circuit was therefore more closed than it appeared: Han purchasing power flowed outward, silk raw material travelled west, and processed cloth returned east, with Roman bullion settling imbalances at intermediate nodes. The high fiscal extraction documented by Alfani, Bolla, and

¹⁵¹Ball 2016, 141–145.

¹⁵²Scheidel 2009c, 178–187.

¹⁵³Ban Gu, “Letter to His Younger Brother Chao” (與弟超書), in “Complete Prose of the Later Han” (後漢文), Yan (ed.) 1958, Vol. 25. Trans. by the author. Note that while Liu (2017, 30) attributes the purchase to the Ban brothers themselves, the original text explicitly identifies the Palace Attendant Dou Xian as the financier of the 800,000 coins transaction.

¹⁵⁴Hildebrandt 2017, 13.

¹⁵⁵Liu 2017, 30–31.

Scheidel channelled sufficient domestic surplus toward the Han elite to sustain this demand,¹⁵⁶ but the fiscal system that concentrated this wealth was the same system that prevented its monetary instruments from travelling with the goods. The coins were a technology of internal administration. Their absence from western sites followed directly from that function.

4.2 Numismatic Iconography and the Articulation of Imperial Authority

Roman and Han coinages differ in metal content, in tax rates, and in how each visualised authority on the coin itself. If the circulation of gold and silver discussed in the preceding sections represents different manifestations of two economic logics, then coinage itself is the primary symbolic medium through which these two empires project their respective ideologies. The sections that follow examine how each empire encoded authority into its coinage, and what happened to those encodings when the coins moved beyond the political systems that had produced them.

4.2.1 Roman Imperial Iconography of Antonine Dynasty

In a Roman world defined by immense geographical distance and profound cultural heterogeneity, the figure of the emperor functioned as the one point of institutional and symbolic continuity shared across the empire's disparate communities. Both the central state and local elites participated in producing and circulating imperial imagery, though their motives, while compatible, were not identical. Unlike monumental architecture or localized statues, the denarius possessed an inherent mobility that allowed imperial imagery to reach populations across a polyglot empire.¹⁵⁷

Antonine coinage actively mobilized imperial ideology. Issues from the Greek East under Antoninus Pius show local magistrates actively negotiating this visual authority. A specific copper alloy coin issued in the city of Cyzicus during the early years of Antoninus Pius's reign (provisionally dated to c. 138–142 AD) illustrates the sophisticated dialogue between the imperial centre and local magistrates.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶Alfani, Bolla, and Scheidel 2025, 1–10.

¹⁵⁷Noreña 2011, 1–19.

¹⁵⁸Roman Provincial Coinage Online, "RPC IV.2, 11185 (temporary)," accessed March 26, 2026,



Fig. 4: Cyzicus, copper alloy coin, c. 138–142 AD

Obverse inscription: “ΑΥΤ ΚΑΙΑΑΡΤΙ ΑΝΤΩΝΕΙΝΟC CEB”

English Translation: “Emperor Caesar Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus”

Obverse design: laureate head of Antoninus Pius, right

Reverse inscription: “ΕΠΙ ΑΡΧΟΝΤΟC ΚΑΙ ΕΚΤΙΑΙΟΥ ΚΥΖΙ ΝΕΩΚΟΡΩΝ”

English Translation: “under archon Claudius Hestiaios, of the Cyzicenes, neokorate”

Reverse design: temple (of Hadrian) with eight columns

On its obverse the coin carries a laureate head of Antoninus Pius with the Greek inscription identifying him as Emperor Caesar Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus. The inclusion of Hadrianus in the titulature was not incidental: it explicitly anchored the new emperor’s authority in the legitimacy of his predecessor, a device common to the Antonine succession.¹⁵⁹ The reverse depicts the Temple of Hadrian at Cyzicus with eight columns, accompanied by an inscription naming the archon *Claudius Hestiaios* and identifying the city as a holder of neokorate status.¹⁶⁰ The neokorate, which means the title of temple-warden of the imperial cult, was a distinction that cities in the Greek East actively competed for and prominently advertised.¹⁶¹ The choice to place this local honorific on the reverse of a coin bearing the imperial portrait was the decision of a local magistrate, not a directive from Rome. By naming Claudius Hestiaios on the coin, the issue served the

<https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/4/11185>. For the broader question of how provincial mints negotiated imperial iconography, see the essays in Howgego, Heuchert, and Burnett (eds.) 2005. Heuchert’s chapter in that volume (ch. 3, esp. pp. 40–41) discusses Kl. Hestiaios of Cyzicus across both his earlier issues as hipparches under Antoninus Pius and his later series as neokoros under Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, illustrating how individual magistrates negotiated imperial iconography over the course of long civic careers. The dating follows RPC IV.2, 11185, which marks the entry as “temporary” with dating “c. 138–142(?)”. Burrell 2004, 89, by contrast, places the Hestiaios issues “late in the reign of Antoninus Pius”, noting that the same archon also appears on early coins of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus.

¹⁵⁹Ando 2000, 36–40.

¹⁶⁰Burrell 2004, 89; cf. RPC IV.2, 11185.

¹⁶¹Price 1984, 62–65; for the definitive treatment of the neokorate institution and its specific development in Kyzikos under Hadrian, see Burrell 2004, 86–99, 275–304.

archon's own civic standing as much as it served the imperial center: the coin documented his tenure and associated him directly with the honors the city held.¹⁶² The obverse belonged to Rome; the reverse belonged to Cyzicus.

Standardized Roman gold coinage circulated extensively toward port cities during the peak of imperial trade. The aurei currently held in the collections of the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Aquileia*, a site which formerly served as a vital Roman commercial hub in the northeast, provide a concrete basis for examining the operation of this iconographic system at the level of the individual object. Two specific issues are of particular relevance to this study, namely an aureus of Antoninus Pius dated to 153 or 154 AD and an aureus of Marcus Aurelius dated to 168 AD, both of which were struck at the central mint in Rome.¹⁶³



Fig. 5: Aureus of Antoninus Pius, 153–154 AD, gold, Rome¹⁶⁴



Fig. 6: Aureus of Marcus Aurelius, 168 AD, gold, Rome.¹⁶⁵

The obverse of the Antonine aureus carries a laureate bust of the emperor facing right, with the legend reading *ANTONINVS AVG PIVS PP TR P XVII* — the tribunician year providing a precise dating anchor for the issue within the reign. According to RIC III, this specimen corresponds to entry no. 233. The reverse

¹⁶²For the broader theoretical framework of how local magistrates utilized imperial honours to reinforce their own civic authority, see Noreña 2011, 18–19. For the specific career and coinage of Claudius Hestaios, see Heuchert 2005, 40–41, and RPC IV.2, 11185.

¹⁶³Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Aquileia, accession details as per museum labels: Aureus of Antoninus Pius, 153–154 AD, gold, Rome; Aureus of Marcus Aurelius, 168 AD, gold, Rome. Photographs by the author.

¹⁶⁴Mattingly and Sydenham 1930 (repr. 1962), 54.

¹⁶⁵Mattingly and Sydenham 1930 (repr. 1962), 228.

features the legend *COS IIII* and depicts Antoninus standing left, holding a globe, with his left arm at his side. The choice of the laureate crown rather than the radiate was deliberate: the laurel wreath carried associations of civic and religious authority rather than the solar or military connotations later attached to the radiate crown.¹⁶⁶ The aureus stood at the apex of the denominational hierarchy, and its metallic integrity was largely preserved across the Antonine period: while the silver denarius was debased progressively, from 83.60% fine under Antoninus Pius to 79.79% at the accession of Marcus Aurelius, the gold standard held. A coin that kept its gold while the silver around it declined made its own argument for authority.¹⁶⁷

Where Trajanic reverses had favoured conquest imagery, the early Antonine programme addressed a different audience: the senatorial elite and provincial notables whose cooperation the dynasty depended on. Under Antoninus Pius, the reverse programme emphasised civic virtues; *Pietas* framed the emperor not as a conqueror but as a custodian of the right relations between the human and divine orders, drawing on a vocabulary legible across the empire's regional diversity.¹⁶⁸ However, this visual strategy shifted significantly under Marcus Aurelius. Following the outbreak of the Parthian war in 162 AD, military imagery became prominent once again. As the *Expeditio orientalis* progressed, the mint produced a wide range of martial types, such as *VICT AVG*, *VICTORIA PARTHICA*, *VIRTVS AVG*, and *REX ARMENIIS DATVS*—transforming the coinage back into an active vehicle for broadcasting the emperor's military authority and imperial conquests.¹⁶⁹

The aureus of Marcus Aurelius dated 168 AD presents a different configuration. The Aquileia specimen (RIC III 189) bears the obverse legend *M ANTONINVS AVG ARM PARTH MAX*, with the reverse displaying *TR P XXII IMP V COS III* alongside a seated Aequitas holding her customary scales and cornucopiae. The nomenclature here does significant ideological work. Retaining “Antoninus” was no mere formality, but a

¹⁶⁶Mattingly and Sydenham 1930 (repr. 1962), 54. RIC III no. 233; Reverse legend: *COS IIII*; Reverse type: Antoninus standing l., holding globe, l. arm at side.

¹⁶⁷Harl 1996, 126–127 (Table 6.1). The fineness figures Harl reproduces derive from Walker 1976–1978, based on specific-gravity analyses now superseded by inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectrometry (ICP-AES), supplemented by laser ablation multi-collector ICP-MS. As Butcher and Ponting 2014, 17–18, demonstrate, these earlier figures have been revised: updated fineness data for the Antonine period may differ from Walker's by several percentage points. Though the broad trend of debasement remains clear, the precise metallurgical values cited here require this caveat.

¹⁶⁸Noreña 2011, 56–98.

¹⁶⁹For the detailed chronological shift towards martial and conquest iconography after 162 AD, including figures of Mars, Victory, and the *REX ARMENIIS DATVS* type, see Mattingly and Sydenham 1930 (repr. 1962), 197–199.

deliberate assertion of dynastic continuity with Antoninus Pius. At the same time, the appended epithets Armeniacus and Parthicus Maximus served to actively broadcast the recent Eastern military triumphs secured under Lucius Verus.¹⁷⁰

The year 168 AD is significant in another respect. It falls precisely at the moment when Marcus Aurelius, having restored the denarius to its Antonine standard of approximately 82% fine after the debasements of 161–168 AD, faced the resumption of Germanic pressure on the Danube frontier.¹⁷¹ The coin captures both pressures at once: a debased silver currency just restored to standard, and an emperor whose Eastern victories had to be commemorated on the obverse legend even as Germanic pressure mounted on the Danube.

The Aquileia aurei show that Antonine gold coinage was neither static nor merely decorative. Portrait types, legends, and reverse programmes shifted reign by reign in response to specific pressures, yet within a visual grammar stable enough to be read from Britain to Syria. The material evidence from Aquileia, particularly the significant influx of Levantine ceramics, glass, confirms that the city functioned as a trading hub where Eastern merchant identities intersected with Roman fiscal administration.¹⁷² This iconographic consistency relied on the physical mobility of the gold coinage. Because the aureus maintained a reliable standard of fineness, it commanded broad acceptance across the Roman Empire, carrying the imperial portrait to its furthest reaches. Such portability, legibility, and institutional independence provided Roman gold with a credit function beyond imperial frontiers that Han bronze coinage, which remained tethered to a centralized administrative system, could not match. What happened to those images once the coins crossed into territories where Roman authority had no hold, and where the imperial portrait was read on entirely different terms, if it was read at all?

¹⁷⁰Mattingly and Sydenham 1930 (repr. 1962), 228. RIC III, no. 189; Reverse legend: TR P XXII IMP V COS III; Reverse type: Aequitas seated l., holding scales and cornucopiae. See RIC III, Obverse legends, no. 9 (M. ANTONINVS AVG. ARM. PARTH. MAX.).

¹⁷¹Harl 1996, 126–127. For the methodological qualifications attaching to the latest specific-gravity figures, see fn. 167 above.

¹⁷²Dobrova and Riccato 2015, 111–128.

4.2.2 Epigraphy and Authority in Han *Wuzhu* Coinage

The contrast with Han numismatic practice is fundamental and deliberate. Where the Roman aureus and denarius carried a portrait of a living ruler alongside inscriptions of power and programmatic virtue imagery, the *Wuzhu* coin offered none of these. Its obverse and reverse bore only two characters: 五銖, *Wuzhu* (5-zhu Coin), rendered in seal script (*zhuan*shu 篆書).¹⁷³ The inscription stated a weight, without a name, a claim, or an image of authority. Han coinage's visual grammar was one of administrative standardization, not political representation.

The *Wuzhu*, introduced under Emperor Wu in 118 BC following a series of monetary reforms that centralized minting authority in the imperial government, was built on the premise that a coin's credibility derived from state enforcement of its weight standard. Peng Xinwei, in his foundational study of Chinese monetary history, notes that the *Wuzhu*'s long dominance, from 118 BC until its replacement by the *Kaiyuan Tongbao* in 621 AD, rested on precisely this administrative legibility. The visual grammar of Han coinage encoded a weight, not an authority. The two specimens illustrated above show how this logic operated across the dynasty's span.

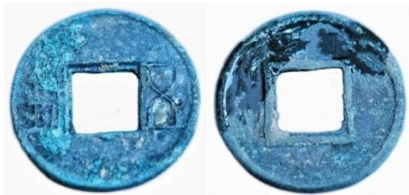


Fig. 7: Shanglin Sanguan *Wuzhu* Coin (Western Han Dynasty, 113 BC – 8 AD)¹⁷⁴



東漢晚期五銖・穿上鳥紋
郭厚 0.15 釐米 重 3.2 克
河南宜陽出土

Fig. 8: Late Eastern Han *Wuzhu* Coin with Bird Motif (Late Eastern Han Dynasty, approx. 184–220 AD), excavated in Yiyang (宜陽), Henan Province. The recorded thickness of 0.15 cm and weight of 3.2 g indicate a slight reduction from the 4.0 g ideal, a trend characteristic of late Eastern Han issues where material constraints often led to lighter and thinner specimens.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³Peng, trans. Kaplan 1994, 105–119.

¹⁷⁴*Shanglin Sanguan* (上林三官): Refers to the three central government officials—*Zhongguan* (Chief of Minting), *Biantong* (Copper Evaluator), and *Jiqiao* (Master of Craft)—who were granted the exclusive right to mint currency in 113 BC. This specific coin is a permanent collection item of the Baoji Bronze Ware Museum; photograph provided by the museum.

¹⁷⁵ Compilation Committee of the Dictionary of Chinese Coins 1998, 590.

The *Shanglin Sanguan* specimen represents the zenith of centralized standardization, struck by the three imperial officials granted exclusive minting rights in 113 BC. Its actual weight of 4.0 to 4.5g deliberately exceeded the nominal 3.255 g standard inscribed on its face, a quality signal rather than mere compliance with it.¹⁷⁶ The Eastern Han variant, nearly two centuries later, had drifted to 3.2 g, yet its face was visually unchanged.

The coin could lose weight without changing its inscription. Yet the relationship between weight and value within the Han system was not one of pure administrative fiat: the deliberate over-weighting of the *Shanglin Sanguan* issues shows that the state itself anchored the coin's credibility partly in physical metal content, treating the excess weight as a quality signal rather than as compliance with the inscribed standard. The administrative contract remained the primary frame within which this value operated, but the contract was reinforced, not replaced, by the metal beneath it. As Helen Wang has observed, the Han bronze system and the precious-metal systems of the western Eurasian trade networks operated on different logics: the former required institutional validation, the latter could be assessed by weight and fineness independently of any issuing authority.¹⁷⁷ For a merchant in the Western Regions, the “5-zhu” inscription provided no guarantee of metal purity or sovereign credit. Unlike Roman coinage, which used the emperor's portrait as a portable proxy for imperial authority, the *Wuzhu* required the physical presence of Han administrative law to function as money.

The spatial distribution of archaeological finds provides empirical support for this territorial limitation. As the excavation records in Helen Wang's census of the Tarim Basin indicate, *Wuzhu* coins in the northwest frontier are predominantly clustered within institutional environments, specifically at administrative headquarters like *Loulan* (Sites L.A. and L.B.) and military watch-stations such as Mazār-tāgh.¹⁷⁸ The archaeological context provided by Sir Aurel Stein in *Innermost Asia* further secures this argument. At Site L.F., a small fortified post along the *Loulan* route, Stein recovered nine coins of the “*Wuzhu* type,” including

¹⁷⁶Peng, trans. Kaplan 1994, 102–108; 246. For the argument that the weight of Shanglin Sanguan Wuzhu coins deliberately exceeded the nominal standard, see Shi 2011, 51.

¹⁷⁷Wang 2004, 24–27.

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 27, 208, 210.

several “small much-clipped pieces” gathered near the foot of the mesa. Significantly, these coins were found in spatial proximity to Kharosthi wedge-tablets and wooden writing-sticks(木簡) unearthed within the same walled enclosure.¹⁷⁹ The coins thus appear as residue of state-mandated payments rather than as instruments of open-market trade.

4.2.3 From Currency to Amulet: Roman Gold in Transregional Circuits

The circulation of Roman precious metals beyond imperial frontiers involved a change in function as these coins moved from Mediterranean fiscal instruments into South Asian stores of value and ritual objects. Unlike the Han *Wuzhu* coinage, which remained tied to a centralized legal framework and lacked significant intrinsic worth, and so had no purchasing power beyond the reach of imperial administration, Roman gold and silver circulated on the strength of their high purity and the recognisability of the imperial portrait. The absence of Roman base metal coins in South India confirms the selective nature of this exchange.¹⁸⁰ Turner observes that the composition of Indian hoards did not reflect general Roman circulation but the specific demands of local traders for high-purity bullion. The shortage of precious metal in central and southern India was acute, and Indians had no use for Roman *aes* since copper coinages of their own were extensively available.¹⁸¹

Roman coins were accepted primarily for their intrinsic value and were often absorbed into local economic and religious practice. Turner notes that these coins were hoarded as bullion rather than used as a medium of daily exchange, and that the majority were eventually melted down into the traditional Indian form of portable wealth, such as jewellery.¹⁸² At sites in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region, Roman coins appear in a different context. As Suresh documents, finds from Ahin Posh, Manikyala, and other sites in this region formed part of ritualistic deposits in Buddhist stupas.¹⁸³ The predominance of Augustan and Tiberian coin types in the Indian hoards, coupled with the absence of silver issues dating after the debasements of Nero, shows that

¹⁷⁹Stein 1928, 266, 269.

¹⁸⁰Turner 1989, 42.

¹⁸¹*Ibid.*

¹⁸²*Ibid.*, 42–43.

¹⁸³Suresh 2004, 28–29.

Indian recipients were concerned with the purity of the metal rather than its nominal value.¹⁸⁴

Suresh provides further evidence for the ritual use of Roman coins by documenting their presence within the sacred architecture of South India. Buddhist sites such as *Bavikonda* and *Totlakonda* have yielded Roman coins within the precincts of Buddhist monuments. Coins have also been found beneath the foundations of an old Hindu temple at Nellore and within the precincts of a Hindu temple at Saidapet. He draws a distinction between coins deposited within the compound of a monastery or temple, which may have been intended for future use, and those purposely placed below a temple or within a stupa “as a gift to the shrine, never to be used again.”¹⁸⁵

Roman coin designs were also reproduced in non-metallic media. At a number of sites across Maharashtra, Karnataka, Orissa, and Andhra — including Brahmapuri — looped or pierced clay *bullae* have been recovered that reproduce the designs of Roman coins. These were made of baked clay rather than gold or silver. Some may originally have been gilded to resemble gold jewels. Suresh suggests that these *bullae* were used by people who could not afford genuine Roman coins or their metallic imitations.¹⁸⁶

After 235 AD, the Roman Empire entered a period of sustained military and fiscal crisis. Sassanid armies under Ardashir I (224–242) and Shapur I (240–270) repeatedly overran Mesopotamia, Syria, and Asia Minor, while Germanic peoples surged across the northern frontiers. The flow of bullion to the imperial mint contracted as frontier wars disrupted mining operations and long-distance trade with the East declined.¹⁸⁷ In 260 AD, Shapur captured the emperor Valerian and seized hundreds of thousands of *antoniniani*, which Sassanid mints recoinced into debased drachms. Humiliating subsidies to Germanic and Persian enemies further drained aurei from the Roman world: in 244 AD, Philip purchased peace from Shapur for 500,000 aurei¹⁸⁸, which Sassanid mints recoinced into their own drachms.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴Turner 1989, 44–45.

¹⁸⁵Suresh 2004, 28–29.

¹⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 80–81.

¹⁸⁷Harl 1996, 128–129.

¹⁸⁸The figure of 500,000 follows Harl 1996, 129. The sum is recorded by the *Res Gestae Divi Saporis* (Shapur’s inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam), which specifies 500,000 denarii rather than aurei; the denomination given here reflects Harl’s interpretation of the payment.

¹⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 128–129.

Yet even as the metropolitan currency was debased, the international reputation of Roman coins endured. Harl observes that the great sovereigns of the East “paid homage to Roman coins by imitation, adoption of Roman weight standards, and adaptation of imperial iconography.” The export of Roman coins to the East reflected, in Harl’s words, “the triumph, not the demise, of Roman imperial currency.”¹⁹⁰

The contrast with the Han monetary system remains instructive, though it must be drawn from the numismatic evidence itself. As Helen Wang has argued, the Han bronze coin and the precious-metal currencies of the western Eurasian trade networks operated on incompatible principles: the *Wuzhu* required institutional validation to function as money, whereas Roman gold and silver could be assessed by weight and fineness independently of any issuing authority.¹⁹¹ In peripheral zones such as the Tarim Basin, archaeological finds confirm that *Wuzhu* coins clustered within institutional environments (administrative headquarters and military watch-stations) and did not circulate freely in open markets.¹⁹² Roman gold, by contrast, moved through commercial channels into territories where no Roman administrative authority existed, and there acquired new functions as bullion, jewellery, votive offering, or prestige object. The two monetary systems thus occupied opposite ends of a spectrum: the one tied to the state that issued it, the other capable of outliving the authority of its issuer and taking on meanings its makers had never intended.

¹⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 312–314.

¹⁹¹Wang 2004, 24–27.

¹⁹²Wang 2004, 27; Stein 1928, 266, 269.

Chapter V. Knowledge Systems, Beliefs, and Cultural Diffusion

5.1 Comparative Study of Imperial Divine Kingship

Both empires bound political authority to sacred ideas, but they did so through structurally incompatible frameworks. In the Han case, legitimacy descended from a cosmological order in which the emperor functioned as a moral pivot accountable to Heaven; in the Roman case, the emperor's sacred status was a product of civic and political practice, conferred (and, when necessary, revoked) by the senatorial community. What follows examines each system in turn before drawing out the structural contrast.

5.1.1 Han's *Tianzi*

In the Han dynasty, the emperor ruled under the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianming* 天命), a cosmological principle that positioned the ruler not as an inherently divine figure but as a moral mediator accountable to Heaven's judgment. Known as the Son of Heaven (*Tianzi* 天子), the emperor occupied a structurally indispensable position within the cosmic order: his personal virtue served as the pivot through which Heaven, Earth, and the human world maintained their alignment. Dong Zhongshu's systematisation of the *Tianren Ganying* (天人感應, the resonance between Heaven and humanity) formalised this relationship into a system of political accountability grounded in natural phenomena: floods, eclipses, and droughts were not merely environmental events but legible signs that the ruler had forfeited moral equilibrium, and therefore Heaven's approval.¹⁹³ As Loewe has shown, Dong's contribution was not simply to state a view that had already been expressed but to take it considerably further, formulating a systematic account of the universe in which the tension between the power of revelatory omens and the rational principles of the Five Phases was resolved

¹⁹³Loewe 1994, 135–139.

into a coherent political theology: the ruler's moral state physically determined the stability of the cosmic order he was charged with maintaining.

Undergirding this ritual system was the concept of the ruler's *De* (德), or moral virtue, understood not merely as a personal ethical quality but as a cosmologically active force. Csikszentmihalyi has demonstrated that Han political thought conceived of *De* as what he terms a "material virtue": authentic moral motivation corresponded to specific bodily states, and the perfection of the ruler's inner equilibrium was understood as an alignment between his physiological condition and the *qi* of Heaven itself.¹⁹⁴ It was this physical dimension of virtue that gave state ritual its political weight. The *feng* (封) and *chan* (禪) sacrifices performed by Emperor *Wu* on Mount *Tai* were not merely ceremonial occasions but cosmological affirmations: public demonstrations that the Han emperor's *De* remained in alignment with Heaven's order and that the dynasty retained its mandate. Ancestral worship reinforced this dimension of imperial legitimacy from a different direction. Imperial tombs and ancestral temples were constructed to sustain a continuous ritual link with past rulers, and the system of *Zhaomu* (昭穆) regulated the sequence of ancestral veneration according to a ritual order inherited from the Zhou, embedding Han imperial authority within a moral tradition that predated conquest.¹⁹⁵

Maintaining this cosmological contract carried a substantial fiscal burden. The ceremonial expenditure demanded by the "Mandate of Heaven" was a permanent charge on the imperial treasury, and the tension between ideological requirement and fiscal capacity was not resolved but managed. The apparatus of the Three Excellencies and the Nine Ministers (三公九卿) was designed precisely to distribute the administrative weight of maintaining Heaven's harmony across a hierarchical bureaucratic system, translating the sovereign's cosmic virtue into the practical governance of a vast territory.¹⁹⁶ During the reign of Emperor *Yuan*, officials openly

¹⁹⁴Csikszentmihalyi 2004, 253.

¹⁹⁵Loewe 1994, 277–295.

¹⁹⁶Loewe 2006, 19–25.

challenged the fiscal burden of large-scale ritual expenditure, a debate that exposed the structural tension at the heart of Han political legitimacy: the same cosmological order that sanctioned imperial authority also imposed ceremonial obligations that the treasury could not indefinitely sustain. This tension had a further institutional dimension. The system's operational effectiveness depended entirely on the integrity of the officials who staffed it. The *chaju* (察舉) recommendation system was designed to select morally qualified men for office, but in practice, eminent families converted their wealth, reputation, and marriage networks into durable influence over local appointments. When such networks became entrenched, the flow of accurate information upward through the bureaucratic hierarchy was compromised, and the emperor's ability to exercise his cosmic function, which presupposed that the state machinery faithfully transmitted Heaven's moral order throughout the empire, was correspondingly diminished. Within the framework of *Tianren Ganying* (天人感應, the resonance between Heaven and humanity), bureaucratic corruption was more than an administrative failure: contemporaries could read it as evidence that the emperor's *De* had weakened.¹⁹⁷

The case of Wang Mang illustrates with particular clarity how this cosmological framework could become a liability as well as a resource. In 9 AD, Wang Mang seized the throne and founded the Xin dynasty, grounding his sweeping land, currency, and administrative reforms in an appeal to Zhou-era cosmological precedent and claiming that Heaven had transferred its mandate to him through observable signs and portents.¹⁹⁸ The difficulty was that the same framework that had legitimated his accession provided an equally legible verdict on his rule. The floods, famines, and regional rebellions that characterised his reign were not merely practical problems but cosmological signals, interpretable within the *Tianren Ganying* framework as evidence that Heaven had withdrawn the mandate Wang Mang had claimed. His government lost control of

¹⁹⁷Ch'en 1986, 766–807.

¹⁹⁸Ban Gu, *Hanshu* 99A–B.

the empire and collapsed in 23 AD.¹⁹⁹ The restored Han dynasty under Emperor *Guangwu* addressed this problem by investing heavily in the omenological apparatus that validated dynastic legitimacy. The Later Han court promoted the theory of the Five Phases to account for dynastic succession, associating the new dynasty with the element of Fire and thereby linking it symbolically to the Zhou kings whose moral authority the Han had always claimed to inherit.²⁰⁰

Even this omenological reinforcement proved insufficient to stabilise the Later Han's political order over the long term. As Ch'en Ch'i-yun has documented, many thinkers of the Later Han period experienced a growing dissatisfaction with the social environment and the political practices of their time, a disillusionment that expressed itself through Confucian critique of the very bureaucratic system through which the mandate was supposed to operate. Wang Fu, whose *Qianfu Lun* (潛夫論) constitutes one of the most sustained critical analyses of Han governance from within the Confucian tradition, argued that corruption and favouritism had spread through the bureaucracy to the point where the moral ideals of Confucian government were no longer practised in any meaningful sense.²⁰¹ By the later decades of the Eastern Han, the empire confronted repeated rebellions, the displacement of imperial authority by powerful court factions, and the progressive breakdown of the centralised administration. What these crises revealed was not a failure of the cosmological theory of kingship but something more structurally significant: the theory depended for its practical operation on an administrative apparatus whose integrity could not be guaranteed by ideology alone. The "Mandate of Heaven" provided a framework within which political legitimacy could be established, contested, and withdrawn, but it could not by itself produce the institutional conditions (effective recruitment, honest reporting, reliable fiscal extraction) on which the stability of a large empire ultimately depended.

¹⁹⁹Bielenstein 1986, 232–240.

²⁰⁰Loewe 1994, 126–127.

²⁰¹Wang Fu, *Qianfu Lun* (潛夫論), "Assessing Achievements" (考績); for Wang Fu's critique in the context of Later Han governance, see Ch'en 1986, 766–807.

5.1.2 Roman Imperial Cult

Where Han imperial authority derived from a cosmological order that was prior to and independent of political institutions, Roman imperial divinity was a product of those institutions themselves, an evolving set of political and civic practices whose primary function was to consolidate authority within a society whose republican traditions placed deep constraints on the open display of monarchical power.²⁰² The memory of the republic was not a mere rhetorical resource; it was a structural limit on what any emperor could claim publicly within the city of Rome throughout the Principate, since open assertions of divine kingship risked provoking exactly the senatorial resistance that the constitutional settlement of Augustus had been designed to forestall.

Augustus navigated these constraints with deliberate care. Rather than claiming royal titles after his victory at Actium, he assembled the powers of various traditional magistracies into a position far above that of any contemporary, while presenting this accumulation as a restoration of the republic rather than a seizure of it. As Hekster has shown, the Principate was sufficiently flexible in its self-presentation to allow different audiences to understand it differently: Augustus could simultaneously be the most prominent senator and an absolute ruler, both traditional and innovative, with the term *princeps* carrying whatever meaning each group needed it to bear.²⁰³ The *Res Gestae* makes this constitutional fiction explicit: “I transferred rights of ownership from my power to that of the senate and people of Rome.” a formulation whose persuasive force depended on nobody pressing the question of whether the transfer had actually occurred.²⁰⁴ Operating within this constraint, Augustus permitted and encouraged the veneration of his *genius*, what Scheid identifies as a personification of the emperor’s innate qualities and a form of traditional cult that could attach to individuals,

²⁰²Scheid 2003, 20.

²⁰³Hekster 2017, 1–8.

²⁰⁴Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 34. Trans. Cooley 2009, 99.

places, or things, and offered a theologically acceptable alternative to the direct worship of a living person.²⁰⁵ Full deification (*apotheosis*) remained reserved for the posthumous award of *divus* status by senatorial vote, a procedural requirement that itself revealed the fundamental asymmetry with the Han model: Roman imperial divinity was a retrospective political judgment contingent on elite approval, not a cosmological entitlement inherent in the office.²⁰⁶

Emperors who overstepped this boundary discovered that the Augustan compact was enforced by the same senatorial class whose cooperation had made it possible. Domitian's insistence on the title *Dominus et Deus*—a claim to living divinity that directly violated the conventions Augustus had established, generated precisely the resistance that constitutional caution had been designed to forestall. His reign became the paradigmatic case of what happened when an emperor demanded a form of recognition that the imperial cult's internal logic could not accommodate without abolishing the fiction of senatorial partnership on which that logic rested.²⁰⁷

The institutional mechanism that made this enforcement visible was the *damnatio memoriae*: the senatorial decision to erase a condemned emperor's public presence by destroying his portraits and erasing his name from inscriptions. As Beard, North, and Price have argued, this practice confirms that Roman imperial divinity was not an ontological attribute of the ruler's person but a status conferred and, crucially, revocable by the civic community that had granted it.²⁰⁸ A *divus* could be unmade. No equivalent mechanism existed within the Han cosmological framework, where the emperor's moral resonance with Heaven was the premise

²⁰⁵Scheid 2003, 162.

²⁰⁶Gradel 2002, 109–116.

²⁰⁷Suetonius, *Life of Domitian*, 13.2.

²⁰⁸Beard, North, and Price 1998, 358–362. The visual and material side of the practice is treated by Varner 2004, with detailed analysis of how imperial portraits were mutilated, recut, or replaced. Flower 2006 sets the practice within the broader Roman culture of organised forgetting.

of legitimate rule rather than its reward.

The adaptability of the imperial cult to local conditions across the empire further underlines its civic rather than doctrinal character. In the Greek-speaking eastern provinces, where Hellenistic traditions of ruler veneration had deep roots, cities competed actively to secure imperial cult honours, constructing temples and claiming the title of *neokoros* (temple-warden of the imperial cult) as a mark of civic prestige. Hekster has shown that in the provinces this competition expressed itself not only through the veneration of living emperors but through the elaboration of imperial divine ancestry, connecting reigning emperors to deified predecessors and, in some contexts, to traditional divine genealogies that gave local communities a means of relating to imperial power through their own religious frameworks.²⁰⁹ What emerged was a cult simultaneously universal in its reach and radically local in its forms: not a single religious doctrine but a political language capable of being spoken in many dialects. This institutional flexibility, without any shared cosmological conviction, held the imperial cult together across the empire's diverse populations. It also marked the cult's clearest departure from the organicist moral cosmology that legitimated Han rule.

5.1.3 The Emperor's Divinity and the Moral Order

In both the Roman and Han worlds the emperor's sacred status was not a fixed attribute inhering in the office but a continuously reproduced political achievement, enacted through ritual, inscription, and the organization of public space. In Rome, the imperial cult provided the most visible articulation of this status, yet its local expressions varied considerably across the empire's regions. Epigraphic evidence from Asia Minor, among them the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* inscribed at Ankara and dedicatory texts from Pergamon and Ephesus, shows how local elites reconfigured Augustan ideology through civic cults that foregrounded *pietas* and *virtus* rather than apotheosis as such.²¹⁰ The monumental altar at *Lugdunum* (Lyon), inscribed with the names of the

²⁰⁹Price 1984, 62–65; Hekster 2015, 266–275.

²¹⁰Price 1984, 62–65.

sixty Gallic tribes, illustrates how the imperial cult served as an instrument for binding provincial communities to an imperial moral order centred on the emperor's virtue.²¹¹ Through these public performances, claims to imperial authority that were politically sensitive in Rome itself could be articulated at the provincial level in a form legible across the empire's diverse populations.

The institutional basis of this divine status was the concept of *pax deorum* (the peace of the gods), which operated as a civic-contractual relationship between the Roman community and the divine order. As Mary Beard has argued, Roman religion amounted to a "vindication of the religious system" through the city's continuing success: the gods were full members of the civic community whose participation was maintained through the correct performance of ritual.²¹² Unlike the Han model of moral resonance, the Roman system treated natural disruptions—*prodigia* (portents)—as technical breaches of this civic contract requiring formal repair. When such a breach was identified, it triggered the procedure of *procuratio*, in which the Senate determined whether an event constituted a public concern and subsequently commissioned the appropriate priestly college (the Pontifices or the keepers of the *Sibylline Books*) to prescribe the necessary expiatory rites.²¹³ Under this arrangement, the emperor's role as *Pontifex Maximus* was defined by his responsibility for ensuring the correct performance of public cult—*cultus deorum*—rather than by any claim to internal moral perfection. As Cicero formulated it, the pontiffs were charged with having "charge of all sacred rites, public and private" and with interpreting "what is lawful in religion."²¹⁴ The stability of the Roman order depended on procedural precision, not on the sovereign's personal virtue.

The Han emperor's sacred status rested on entirely different foundations. It derived from the "Mandate of Heaven" (*Tianming*), a moral and cosmological imperative rather than a retrospective political adjudication. Archaeological and textual sources, among them the *Mawangdui* silk manuscripts and the uninscribed stele erected by Emperor *Wu* on Mount *Tai*, demonstrate the emperor's indispensable role as the mediator

²¹¹Fishwick 1987, 105–124.

²¹²Beard, North, and Price 1998, 74.

²¹³Scheid 2003, 150–151.

²¹⁴Cicero, *De Legibus* 2.19–21, trans. Keyes 1928, 455.

connecting Heaven and Earth.²¹⁵ Aihe Wang has shown that this relationship was not a static cosmological structure but a site of constant political transformation: cosmology and political culture in early China were formed through a common process of mutual production, each reshaping the other as dynastic circumstances changed.²¹⁶ Unlike the Roman procedure of *procuratio*, which treated natural disruptions as technical faults in the performance of civic contract, the Han system interpreted natural calamities as “bad signs” (*zai yi* 災異) that signalled a moral-organic disturbance in the cosmic body, evidence that the emperor’s virtue had lost its alignment with Heaven’s order. The excavated ritual evidence associated with the *Fengshan* sacrifices at Mount *Tai* confirms that these ceremonies were directed toward demonstrating the alignment of the emperor’s moral virtue (*De* 德) with the cosmic order, grounding political legitimacy in ethical conduct and ritual reciprocity rather than in the personal divinity of the ruler.²¹⁷

These two systems assigned the emperor a structurally different position within the cosmic order. The Roman model divinized the ruler through a retrospective act of civic decree, locating his sacred status in the public cult he administered rather than in his personal moral state. The Han model, by contrast, made the emperor’s inner virtue the operative mechanism through which cosmic harmony was maintained. Csikszentmihalyi has characterized Han political thought’s conception of imperial *De* as a “material virtue”: the perfection of the ruler’s moral state was understood as a physical, ontological alignment between his inner condition and the invisible *qi* of Heaven, not merely a symbolic or rhetorical claim.²¹⁸ This understanding was systematized in the mid-Han period by Dong Zhongshu, who reconstructed Han cosmology by moralizing the physical universe. In his account, *Yin* and *Yang* were not equal physical energies but a fixed moral hierarchy in which *Yang*—associated with bounty and virtue (*de* 德)—was categorically superior to *Yin*, associated with punishment (*xing* 刑).²¹⁹ On this account, the sovereign was the exclusive moral agent through whom Heaven’s intentions were conveyed to the human world. Dong encapsulated this cosmological centrality in his

²¹⁵Loewe 1994, 88–102.

²¹⁶Wang 2000, 1–2.

²¹⁷Loewe 1994, 88–102; 277–293.

²¹⁸Csikszentmihalyi 2004, 253.

²¹⁹Wang 2000, 189.

interpretation of the character for king (*wang* 王): the three horizontal strokes represent the realms of Heaven, Man, and Earth, while the central vertical stroke represents the sovereign as the sole link connecting and communicating between the three.²²⁰

This exclusive cosmological function stood in deliberate contrast to the pluralist model advanced by the *Huainanzi*. Where Dong Zhongshu made *Tianren Ganying* (the resonance between Heaven and humanity) the exclusive prerogative of the sovereign, the *Huainanzi* argued that resonance had nothing to do with political status or authority: any individual who achieved “perfect sincerity” (*jingcheng* 精誠) could unite with the *Dao* and resonate with the cosmos. This decentralized model of emperorship promoted a “nonaction” (*wuwei* 無為) ruler whose function was not to impose Heaven’s will but to efface his own intentions and allow the cosmos to respond spontaneously.²²¹ Dong’s system required the opposite: an “active sovereign” (*youwei* 有為) who was duty-bound to “receive the action of Heaven from above, and to correct his own actions below.” The Han emperor was not, in this account, a god divinized by civic decree; he was the moral pivot of the universe, whose inner alignment with Heaven’s order was the condition of political stability itself. The contrast with the Roman civic-contractual model could not be more complete: where Roman imperial cult translated the emperor’s authority into a publicly administered religious institution, Han cosmological thought located that authority in the invisible moral state of the sovereign’s person.

5.2 Antonine Dynasty and Later Han: Stoic *Logos* and the Cosmological Order

While the foundations of imperial sacred authority were established in earlier periods of both empires, the Antonine dynasty and the Later Han witnessed a closer integration of religious thought and political administration. Neither empire could separate political stability from the favour of its gods, or of Heaven. Roman religion emphasized a system of reciprocal obligation between the human community and the gods. Han political thought, by contrast, interpreted imperial authority through a cosmological framework linking Heaven, nature, and political order through patterns of correlation.

²²⁰*Ibid.*, 189.

²²¹*Ibid.*, 190.

5.2.1 From *Pax Deorum* to Stoic Providentia

During the Antonine period Roman religious practice remained rooted in traditional ritual structures. The Romans understood the stability of the state through the concept of *pax deorum*, the “peace of the gods”: a condition that required sacrifices and rituals to be performed correctly so that the reciprocal relationship between the Roman community and the divine world could be maintained. The welfare of the state, often described as the *salus populi Romani*, depended on the preservation of this balance.²²²

Roman religion therefore worked less as a system of personal belief than as a public system of civic obligation, what Scheid has called a “political religion,” in which every communal action had a religious dimension and every religious action had a communal one.²²³ Its logic was organised around the virtue of *pietas*, which referred less to inner devotion than to dutiful respect for divine and civic obligations. Religious authority operated through ritual precision, which the Romans termed *religio*. As Cicero explained in *De Natura Deorum*, those “who carefully reviewed and so to speak retraced all the lore of ritual were called ‘religious’ from *relegere* (to retrace or re-read)”. Even minor errors in ritual performance (*vitium*) could invalidate a sacrifice and threaten the stability of the *pax deorum*, since such failures were understood to provoke divine anger (*ira deorum*), which might manifest as plague, famine, or military disaster.²²⁴

When unusual phenomena or prodigies (*prodigia*) appeared, they were interpreted as signs that this balance had been disturbed. Livy describes how the Roman state responded after the defeat at Lake Trasimene in 217 BC, when a series of prodigies led the Senate to commission investigations and expiatory rites in order to restore divine favour.²²⁵ The process of *procuratio* required religious specialists to determine the cause of

²²²Beard, North, and Price 1998, 30–41.

²²³Scheid 2003, 20.

²²⁴Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 2.72, trans. Rackham 1933, 193.

²²⁵Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 22.9–10, trans. Foster 1929, 231–235; see also Scheid 2003, 116–117.

divine displeasure and to prescribe the necessary rituals of expiation. These responsibilities fell primarily to the *pontifices*, presided over by the *pontifex maximus*. By the imperial period this office had become closely associated with the emperor himself, reinforcing the link between religious authority and imperial power. Cicero defined the duties and hierarchical supremacy of the pontiffs within this state-administered structure in *De Legibus*:

“*Divisque aliis alii sacerdotes, omnibus pontifices, singulis flamines sunt. virginesque Vestales in urbe custodiunt ignem foci publici sempiternum.*”²²⁶

“The several gods shall have their several priests, the gods all together their pontiffs, and the individual gods their flamens. The Vestal Virgins shall guard the eternal fire on the public hearth of the city.”

Under the Antonine emperors these traditional institutions continued to function, but they were increasingly interpreted through the vocabulary of Stoic philosophy. Stoic thinkers described the universe as governed by a rational principle, the *Logos*, within which the stability of the Roman state could be understood as participating in a wider rational order governing both nature and human society. This perspective is visible in the writings of Marcus Aurelius himself. In the *Meditations* he describes the relationship between the individual soul and the cosmos:

“*Πᾶν μοι συναρμόζει, ὃ σοὶ εὐάρμοστόν ἐστιν, ὃ κόσμος· οὐδέν μοι πρόωρον οὐδὲ ὄψιμον τὸ σοὶ εὐκαιρον· πᾶν μοι καρπός, ὃ φέρουσιν αἱ σαὶ ὥραι, ὃ φύσις· ἐκ σοῦ πάντα, ἐν σοὶ πάντα, εἰς σέ πάντα.*”

“Universe, your harmony is my harmony: nothing in your good time is too early or too late for me. Nature, all that your seasons bring is fruit to me: all comes from you, exists in you, returns to you.”²²⁷

²²⁶Cicero, *De Legibus* 2.8.20, trans. Keyes 1928 (repr. 1970), 394–395.

²²⁷Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.23, trans. Hammond 2006, 28. Hadot 1998 reads *the Meditations* as Marcus’s private record of spiritual exercise rather than as systematic exposition, and remains the standard treatment of the work in this light.

Within this intellectual framework imperial authority could be interpreted as participation in the rational structure of the universe: the emperor's duty was therefore not only to maintain ritual obligations but to govern in accordance with cosmic reasons.

The Stoic reinterpretation of traditional cult did not replace older ritual logic but overlaid it with philosophical meaning. The cult of Vesta illustrates this process. The sacred fire (*ignis Vestae*), maintained perpetually in the Roman Forum, represented the enduring life of the Roman state; in the Stoic framework it could simultaneously evoke the creative and rational fire that Stoic cosmology described as animating the universe.²²⁸ The six Vestal Virgins who maintained this fire, chosen in childhood and bound by a thirty-year vow of chastity (*pudicitia*), were not primarily pastoral figures but institutional embodiments of civic continuity: their physical integrity and the permanence of the flame were structurally equivalent, each guaranteeing the other within the logic of *pax deorum*. Dionysius of Halicarnassus records the severity with which this duty was regarded: the extinction of the sacred fire was considered a dire portent for the city.²²⁹

The penalties for violating a Vestal's vow reflected the same institutional logic. Plutarch preserves the most detailed account of the procedure: a Vestal convicted of unchastity was stripped of the insignia of her office, borne through the Forum on a covered litter as in a funeral, and conducted to an underground chamber prepared at the Campus Sceleratus near the Colline Gate, where she was left to die without the spilling of her blood. The procedure is corroborated by Livy.²³⁰

²²⁸Beard, North, and Price 1998, 50–54. On the cult of Vesta and the institutional position of its priestesses, see further Beard 1980, 12–27.

²²⁹Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 2.67.5, trans. Cary 1937, 509: the extinction of the fire is described as ἀφανισμοῦ τῆς πόλεως σημεῖον — “an omen that portends the destruction of the city.” Cf. Plutarch, *Numa* 9.6, trans. Perrin 1914, which describes the procedure for rekindling the sacred fire from sunlight but does not present extinction itself as a portent.

²³⁰Plutarch, *Life of Numa* 10.4–7, trans. Perrin 1914; cf. Livy 8.15.7–8 and 22.57.2–3, with Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 2.67.3–4.

The severity of this penalty was not disproportionate within the framework it presupposed. If the Vestal's chastity was structurally tied to the *pax deorum*, then its violation was no longer a personal offence: it was a breach of the contract on which the state's security depended. The same reasoning explains why ritual error (*vitium*) was treated as a public, not private, concern. Stoic philosophy did not displace this logic but reframed it: what had been understood as an exchange of obligations between the Roman community and its gods could now also be understood as the Roman state's participation in the rational order of the *Logos*. The two registers coexisted without contradiction in Antonine religious practice because they served compatible functions, one institutional and one philosophical, within a system whose authority rested on the correct performance of civic duty, not on doctrinal uniformity.

5.2.2 Interpreting Cosmic Signals: Roman Hepatoscopy and Han Cosmological Divination

Both the Antonine Roman state and the Later Han dynasty relied on specialised forms of divination to interpret signs from the cosmos. Although their intellectual foundations differed, both societies treated political decision-making as requiring alignment with supernatural or cosmological forces, and both maintained institutional apparatuses for producing and interpreting such knowledge.

In the Roman world, one important tradition was hepatoscopy: the inspection of the liver of sacrificial animals. This practice formed part of the *disciplina Etrusca*, a body of religious knowledge inherited from the Etruscans. The *haruspex* examined the internal organs of the sacrificial victim and interpreted irregularities as signs of divine approval or disapproval.

A surviving artifact illustrates this system. The Bronze Liver of Piacenza divides the organ into sections associated with particular deities. Van der Meer has interpreted this object as a cosmological map in which the liver's structure mirrored the organisation of the heavens, allowing the *haruspex* to read the disposition of the

gods from the condition of a specific region of the liver.²³¹ Cicero explains the political purpose of this type of divination in *De Divinatione*:

“*Ut ordiar ab haruspicina, quam ego rei publicae causa communisque religionis colendam censeo. ... Inspiciamus, si placet, exta primum.*”

“In discussing separately the various methods of divination, I shall begin with soothsaying, which, according to my deliberate judgment, should be cultivated from reasons of political expediency and in order that we may have a state religion. ... In the first place, then, if you please, let us make ‘an inspection’ of entrails!”²³²

Roman magistrates consulted diviners before major public actions: elections, military campaigns, or the founding of colonies. In this sense divination functioned as a political instrument through which the state sought to verify divine approval before committing to irreversible action.



Fig. 9. The Liver of Piacenza with diagram and Etruscan inscriptions.

A comparable institutional concern with cosmic alignment existed in the Later Han dynasty. Han intellectual traditions emphasised the interaction between Heaven (*Tian* 天), the natural world, and human political authority. The *Hou Hanshu* records the diversity of mantic techniques in use during this period:

“漢自武帝頗好方術，天下懷協道藝之士，莫不負策抵掌，順風而屈焉。”

²³¹van der Meer 1987, 1–15; 165.

²³²Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2.12.28, trans. Falconer 1923 (repr. 1971), 400–401.

“During the Han dynasty, after Emperor *Wu* showed a particular interest in esoteric arts and techniques, people throughout the land who possessed knowledge of Daoist skills or crafts all carried their scrolls and clapped their hands in eagerness, arriving with the prevailing winds.”²³³

This centralized patronage facilitated the development of specialized tools. One important instrument was the *Shi* board (式盤), a cosmological device composed of a rotating circular plate representing Heaven placed above a square base representing Earth. As Harper has shown in his analysis of Han divinatory practice, the *shi* board provided specialists with a mechanical model of cosmic movement, allowing them to identify moments when celestial configurations were propitious for particular political or military actions.²³⁴



Fig. 10. Han-dynasty lacquered shi divination board (shi pan), excavated in 1972 from the

Han tomb at Mozuzi, Wuwei. Image source: Gansu Provincial Museum, China.

This technique was closely associated with *kanyu* (堪輿), which sought to understand the circulation of *qi* throughout the universe. By aligning the axes of the board with astronomical directions, practitioners attempted to identify the moments when imperial actions would resonate with the dominant cosmic forces of the period.²³⁵ Cullen’s analysis of Han astronomical instrumentation has established that the *shi* board’s spatial organisation reflected a systematic cosmological model instead of an ad hoc ritual device, with the cardinal directions calibrated to specific heavenly forces in a manner that made the instrument a practical tool for political consultation.²³⁶

²³³Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 82A. Trans. by the author, based on Chinese Text Project.

²³⁴Harper 1978, 1–10.

²³⁵Harper 1978, 9.

²³⁶Cullen 1996, 45–52.

The contrast between the Liver of Piacenza and the *shi* board is instructive beyond its surface difference in medium. Roman hepatoscopy proceeded by reading divine intention from the condition of a specific organic object, a technique whose logic presupposed that the gods communicated through the bodies of sacrificial victims. Han divination operated instead through the reproduction of cosmic structure in a mechanical model, locating the diviner's authority not in the interpretation of an anomaly but in the correct alignment of the instrument with forces understood to be continuously present and mathematically regular. Where Roman practice was oriented toward communication, securing a response from personal divine agents— Han practice was oriented toward calibration: identifying the moment when human action and cosmic rhythm could be brought into correspondence. The contrast runs deeper than a difference in technique. Roman practice rested on the civic-contractual relationship with personal gods that the preceding sections have described, and Han practice on the organicist theory of resonance between the ruler's moral state and the impersonal order of Heaven.

5.3 Buddhist Transmission along the Silk Road

The second century AD marked the period of closest documented contact between the Roman and Han Empires, most notably evidenced by the arrival of a mission from “*An-tun*” (Marcus Aurelius Antoninus) at the Han court in 166 AD. While this episode demonstrates the logistical reach of the Antonine commercial world, it did not lead to sustained exchange of philosophy, ideology, or religion. The Silk Road facilitated the movement of high-value goods, but it remained largely ineffective as a conduit for the transmission of state-embedded intellectual systems such as Stoic cosmology or the Han concept of *tianren ganying* (天人感應, ‘resonance between Heaven and humanity’). The institutional embedding of each empire's religious and political frameworks, Roman civic cults tied to law and urban ceremonial space, Han cosmology dependent on ritual resonance between ruler, land, and *qi*—constrained cross-cultural intellectual transfer at the level of doctrine. Roman and Han elites perceived one another primarily as distant sources of luxury goods as opposed

to as potential interlocutors in matters of ideology.

Buddhist ideas, by contrast, began to move from India into Han China during the first and second centuries AD, developing in parallel with the Antonine period. Early *Mahāyāna* currents in India, transmitted through Central Asian intermediaries, namely merchants, refugees, and monks operating within the Parthian and Kushan domains, carried teachings that were not dependent on state sponsorship, which enabled their dissemination along the eastern reaches of the Silk Road.²³⁷

By the mid-first century AD, Buddhism had established an initial presence within Han elite circles. The *Hou Hanshu* records that *Liu Ying*, King of Chu, “delighted in Buddhist fasting and offerings 學為浮屠齋戒祭祀” around 65 AD—an account in which, as Zürcher observes, Buddhist ceremonies of fasting and sacrifice appear as little more than a variation of existing Daoist practices, this mixture of Buddhist and Daoist elements remaining characteristic of Han Buddhism as a whole.²³⁸ Early translation and interpretation efforts reflected this syncretism. The method of *geyi* (concept-matching), in which Buddhist categories such as *nirvāṇa* were recast in terms drawn from Daoist philosophy, provided an initial framework for making Indian teachings intelligible to Chinese audiences.²³⁹

This early pattern of integration suggests that Buddhism’s initial reception in China did not depend on any deliberate strategy of institutional implantation. The teachings moved across political boundaries by attaching themselves to the margins of existing intellectual traditions, first absorbed in the syncretic form documented at the court of Liu Ying, then gradually acquiring a more independent doctrinal identity as translation communities developed the philological tools needed to distinguish Indian Buddhist concepts from their Daoist analogues.²⁴⁰

²³⁷Liu 2023, 465–484.

²³⁸Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 42; trans. Zürcher 2007, 26–27.

²³⁹Zürcher 2007, 184.

²⁴⁰Foltz 2010, 49–51; Zürcher 2007, 26–27.

The long-term consequences of this decentralised transmission became more visible during the late Han and the Wei–Jin period (220–420 AD). The monk Dao'an (312–385 AD) played a central role in the early systematisation of Buddhist scriptures in China. His bibliographic work, which Zürcher describes as establishing a standard subsequently followed by all later Buddhist bibliographers, involved collecting, classifying, and distinguishing authentic translations from spurious or anonymous compositions, including the compilation of the *Zongli Zhongjing Mulu* (Comprehensive Catalogue of Sutras, 374 AD).²⁴¹ Dao'an's career also illustrates the intellectual transition away from the *geyi* method: he emphatically rejected the practice of matching Buddhist categories to Daoist terminology, recognising that the resemblance between the two traditions, however convenient for initial reception, obscured instead of conveyed the distinctive content of Indian Buddhist doctrine.²⁴²

The translation of major canonical collections, including the Āgamas, extended this philological orientation, gradually providing Chinese audiences with a more coherent representation of early Buddhist doctrine and enabling Buddhism to develop an institutional and doctrinal structure capable of sustaining itself within the Chinese intellectual environment without continuous dependence on Indian or Central Asian intermediaries.

The contrast between the immobility of state-embedded religious systems and the geographical range of Buddhist transmission reflects a structural difference in the conditions under which each could travel. Bentley has drawn a fundamental distinction between what he terms “non-proselytizing traditions” among which he includes Confucianism and Daoism, and by extension the civic religious frameworks of imperial states, and the actively proselytizing world religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, whose institutional character was not tied to any single political authority and which could therefore seek adherents across political

²⁴¹Zürcher 2007, 184–196.

²⁴²Zürcher 2007, 184–187.

boundaries.²⁴³ Buddhist transmission operated through a different logic. Foltz has shown that the process was driven not by formal diplomacy or imperial patronage but by the initiative of individual monks and merchants working through decentralised networks of translation communities and monastic centres, often without any form of state sponsorship. The Parthian monk An Shigao, who arrived in Luoyang in 148 AD and organised the first systematic translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese, and the Parthian merchant An Xuan, who joined his translation team in 181 AD, both worked entirely outside the tributary framework through which the Han state processed foreign contacts.²⁴⁴ Linguistic evidence reinforces the decentralised character of this transmission: the evolution of Buddhist terminology via Parthian and Sogdian before its entry into the Chinese lexicon reflects the succession of intermediary communities through which the tradition passed, none of which was tied to a single political authority.²⁴⁵ The earliest Chinese records of Buddhist practice, including the account of Liu Ying in the *Hou Hanshu*, register this adaptability directly: Buddhist ceremonies were absorbed into existing Daoist ritual frameworks, establishing a precedent for religious transmission that operated through local assimilation instead of through any form of official state-to-state exchange.²⁴⁶ Later transregional traditions, as Nestorianism most prominently, entered China by the same route: through merchant and monastic networks. The Central Asian corridor remained open to decentralised religious movement for the same reason that official inter-imperial relations could not use it: because it bypassed state institutions entirely.²⁴⁷

²⁴³Bentley 1993, 12.

²⁴⁴Foltz 2010, 49–51.

²⁴⁵*Ibid.*

²⁴⁶*Ibid.*

²⁴⁷Nicolini-Zani 2006, 23; 39–44.

Conclusion

A reconstruction of income inequality in the two empires, published only recently, has produced a result whose interpretation is not straightforward.²⁴⁸ Both Han China and Rome, despite developing in institutional isolation from one another and operating on monetary and administrative principles that were in many respects incompatible, exhibit comparable patterns of elite wealth concentration. The Han fiscal apparatus extracted a somewhat larger proportion of agrarian surplus and produced a marginally higher inequality coefficient at the top of the distribution, but the structural similarity is the more striking finding, and the harder to account for. Two polities, with no shared legal tradition, no common monetary standard, and no documented institutional contact at all, and yet broadly analogous arrangements for concentrating surplus and distributing privilege. The archival and monetary divergences traced in the preceding chapters do not contradict that finding. They sit beside it. The surface logics of governance were, on most measures, genuinely different. Certain measurable outcomes were not.

One way of accounting for the convergence has been worked out in detail by Peter Fibiger Bang, whose comparative work on Roman and Chinese political economy frames what he calls the ‘paradox of agrarian empire’. The paradox is straightforward to state and harder to resolve. Both empires officially mistrusted merchants and condemned private accumulation; both, in practice, depended on commercial networks they could not control and concentrated fiscal surpluses through tributary mechanisms that generated elite demand for precisely the goods their own ideology disapproved of. The result, in both cases, was a state that consumed what its conquests delivered: silk, gold, and exotic substances, all of them flowing through long-distance trade that the imperial centre at once denounced and required. Bang opens his discussion with a passage from Dio Chrysostom in which the orator complains that Romans are paying ‘tribute’ to peoples who could not even set foot on Roman soil, sending their silver eastward of their own volition in exchange for the rare goods that

²⁴⁸Alfani, Bolla, and Scheidel 2025, 1–10.

mark imperial taste. The complaint is moral, but the underlying mechanism is structural: tributary fiscal extraction at home produced the very pattern of elite consumption that drove bullion outward and that imperial writers then read as a sign of decadence.²⁴⁹ The same dynamic is visible, with different vocabulary, in Han imperial discourse, in sumptuary regulations, in periodic state monopolies on iron and salt, in the recurring official anxiety about merchants becoming too wealthy. The vocabulary differs because the political traditions differ. The mechanism does not. If the two empires arrived at comparable inequality coefficients despite developing along incompatible cultural and institutional paths, much of the explanation is probably contained in this paradox: agrarian empires of a certain scale, regardless of their cultural starting point, produced fiscal arrangements that concentrated wealth in similar ways and generated commercial flows that their own ideologies were ill-equipped to make sense of.

Some of this convergence may not be cultural at all.

Both empires faced the structural problem of defending long frontiers against pressures that could not be permanently subjugated, though the pressures were not the same. Han China fronted onto the Mongolian and Central Asian steppe — the world of the *Hsiung-nu* (匈奴) and their successors — and devoted enormous resources to a frontier policy that oscillated between military campaign, tributary diplomacy, and outright payment for peace. Rome's frontier was different in kind: the Rhine–Danube line against Germanic confederacies, the eastern limes against the Parthian and later Sasanid empires, the North African desert edge. The two empires did not, in any direct sense, share a frontier. What they shared was the structural condition of a settled imperial state coexisting uneasily with mobile or rival populations beyond its administrative reach. What they also shared, in the same decade, was disease. The epidemic outbreaks recorded in Roman and Chinese sources during the 160s and 170s AD coincided with exactly the moment when the intensification of

²⁴⁹Bang 2009, 100–101, citing Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 79.5–6. The phrase ‘paradox of agrarian empire’ is Bang’s.

long-distance trade had, for the first time, connected their previously separate disease pools.²⁵⁰ Whether the Antonine Plague and the epidemics in the *Hou Hanshu* involved the same pathogen is not determinable from available evidence; the Chinese clinical descriptions are too sparse for diagnosis. The chronological coincidence is suggestive without being conclusive. What is not in doubt is that the routes which connected the two empires for trade also connected them, with a lag of perhaps months, as conduits for disease.

The five domains examined in the preceding chapters were chosen because each exposes a different structural barrier to institutional contact. They do not exhaust the comparison. Military organisation, hydraulic infrastructure, legal culture, and elite education would all repay the same kind of treatment. There is no shortage of material.

It is also worth being plain about the asymmetry on which this study depends. Almost everything we can say about the 166 AD episode, about Han imaginings of *Da Qin*, and about the bureaucratic reception of foreign contact in general comes from one side of the encounter. There is no Roman counterpart record; what survives is silence. And the Chinese record itself was compiled, in Fan Ye's case, three centuries after the events it describes, in the middle of a dynastic intrigue that would eventually cost him his life.²⁵¹ None of this invalidates the comparison. It does mean that the structural divergence between the two documentary traditions is itself part of what is being compared, and that there is no neutral position outside it from which the encounter can be observed. The asymmetry is the subject as much as the obstacle.

The travellers who arrived at the Han court in 166 AD with their ivory and tortoiseshell were almost certainly merchants. They had sailed the monsoon routes far enough to reach the Vietnamese coast. They had heard, presumably from Indian or Southeast Asian intermediaries, that the Han court could be approached through the tributary register. They had calculated the attempt was worth making. Once they had been received

²⁵⁰McLaughlin 2010, 59–60; McNeill 1976, 116–118; de Crespigny 2007, 514–515.

²⁵¹Mittag and Ye 2008, 347–369.

and their gifts catalogued, they presumably returned to wherever they had come from, and lived out the remainder of their lives somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean or its trade hinterland, never knowing that the brief audience they had obtained would become, in the documentary record of one of the two empires they had connected, the only direct contact between them in the entire ancient period. The other empire, their own, did not record their journey at all. The asymmetry between those two responses to the same event is, in miniature, the structural divergence this study has tried to describe. It is also, finally, a fact about how two different administrative cultures decided what was worth committing to memory and what was not.

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