

Roman World suffered from a trade imbalance with the East. By the third century C.E. this trade imbalance contributed to the empire's overall social and economic miseries.

Rome's Asiatic trade introduced other even more damaging miseries, as well. From the mid second through the sixth centuries a series of new diseases, which appear to have traveled along the Silk Road from the east, devastated the Mediterranean. Each new disease, appearing as it did among an unprotected population, resulted in massive die offs. The impact of the sudden deaths of tens of millions of Mediterraneans during these four and a half centuries significantly contributed to the eventual transformation of the Greco-Roman World.

Regardless of these tragic consequences, trade along the Silk Road continued, at times somewhat tenuously, after the empires of Rome and Han China had passed away. During the fifth and sixth centuries C.E. trade slowed to a trickle, but it revived dramatically during the age of China's Tang Dynasty (618–907). The riches that were available to the merchants willing to brave the hazards of this caravan network that linked eastern and western Eurasia were just too attractive to ignore.

Our first source chronicles the efforts of a Chinese diplomat whose travels westward in the late second century B.C.E. helped open up the Silk Road. Our second source, a collection of four artifacts, suggests that more than just gold and goods traveled in the caravans of the Silk Road.

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Zhang Qian's Western Expedition

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40 ▼ Sima Qian,

THE RECORDS OF THE GRAND HISTORIAN

One of the most impressive achievements of Emperor Han Wudi (source 35) was his extension of imperial power far beyond China's traditional borders. Under his leadership, China entered into an age of confident military expansion, pushing vigorously against its neighbors to the north, west, and south. The emperor's aggressive foreign policy brought China into conflict with the *Xiongnu*, a nomadic Turkish people of the steppes, whose mounted archers were formidable foes. Searching for allies against the *Xiongnu*, the emperor dispatched one of his courtiers, Zhang Qian, in 138 B.C.E. to the court of the *Yuezhi*, another Turkish steppe people. After a series of harrowing adventures, the indomitable Zhang Qian caught up with the *Yuezhi* in *Daxia*, which the West knew as *Bactria* (source 31), but was unable to convince them to ally with China against their common foe, the *Xiongnu*. Although his mission ended in apparent failure, Zhang Qian returned to the Chinese imperial court in 126 with exciting information about West and South Asia, areas with which China had not had much direct contact previously. Zhang Qian's travels ushered in a fruitful period of interchange between China and West Asia, and he is rightly remembered as one of the pioneers who blazed the trail of what became the Silk Road.

In this selection the court historian Sima Qian (whom we saw in Chapter 4, source 26) writes about events that took place during his own youth and young manhood. Remember, the Chinese place family names first, so these two Qians shared given names but were not related.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What evidence is there that at least some of the western barbarians desired closer contacts with China?
2. What evidence is there in this account for the existence of at least indirect trade between China and West Asia before Zhang Qian's travels? Which Chinese goods made their way west, and how did they get there?
3. How safe was it to travel from China to West Asia in the late second century B.C.E.?
4. What about Zhang Qian's report particularly caught the interest of Han Wudi?
5. How did Zhang Qian propose to establish contact between China and Daxia? What was the result of the emperor's following his proposal?
6. After studying this account, what do you conclude China first had to do before it was possible for there to be a Silk Road between East and West Asia?

Zhang Qian was the first person to bring back a clear account of Dayuan.¹ . . . At this time [139 B.C.E.] the emperor questioned various Xiongnu² who had surrendered to the Han, and they all reported that the Xiongnu had defeated the king of the Yuezhi people and had made his skull into a drinking vessel. As a result the Yuezhi had fled and bore a constant grudge against the Xiongnu, though as yet they had been unable to find anyone to join them in an attack on their enemy.

The Han at this time were engaged in a concerted effort to destroy the Xiongnu, and therefore, when the emperor heard this, he decided to try to send an envoy to establish relations with the Yuezhi. To reach them, however, an envoy would inevitably have to pass through Xiongnu territory. The emperor accordingly sent out a summons for men capable of undertaking such a

mission. Zhang Qian, who was a palace attendant at the time, answered the summons and was appointed as envoy.

He set out, . . . accompanied by Kanfu, a Xiongnu slave. . . . They traveled west through the territory of the Xiongnu and were captured by the Xiongnu and taken before the Shanyu.³ The Shanyu detained them and refused to let them proceed. "The Yuezhi people live north of me," he said. "What does the Han mean by trying to send an envoy to them! Do you suppose . . . the Han would let my men pass though China?"

The Xiongnu detained Zhang Qian for over ten years and gave him a wife from their own people, by whom he had a son. Zhang Qian never once relinquished the imperial credentials that marked him as an envoy of the Han, and after he

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⁴See note 1.

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¹A Central Asian steppe kingdom to China's northwest located in a region that today encompasses portions of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

²The Xiongnu were possibly the ancestors of the Huns who devastated the Roman Empire in the fifth century C.E.

³The Xiongnu king.

had lived in Xiongnu territory for some time and was less closely watched than at first, he and his party finally managed to escape and resume their journey toward the Yuezhi.

After hastening west for twenty or thirty days, they reached the kingdom of Dayuan.⁴ The king of Dayuan had heard of the wealth of the Han empire and wished to establish communication with it, though as yet he had been unable to do so. When he met Zhang Qian he was overjoyed and asked where Zhang Qian wished to go.

"I was dispatched as envoy of the Han to the Yuezhi, but the Xiongnu blocked my way and I have only just now managed to escape," he replied. "I beg Your Highness to give me some guides to show me the way. If I can reach my destination and return to the Han to make my report, the Han will reward you with countless gifts!"

The king of Dayuan trusted his words and sent him on his way, giving him guides and interpreters to take him to the state of Kangju.⁵ From there he was able to make his way to the land of the Great Yuezhi.

Since the king of the Great Yuezhi had been killed by the Xiongnu, his son had succeeded him as ruler and had forced the kingdom of Daxia [Bactria] to recognize his sovereignty.⁶ The region he ruled was rich and fertile and seldom troubled by invaders, and the king thought only of his own enjoyment. He considered the Han too far away to bother with and had no particular intention of avenging his father's death by attacking the Xiongnu. . . .

After spending a year or so in the area, Zhang Qian began to journey back, . . . but he was once

more captured by the Xiongnu and detained over a year. Just at this time the Shanyu died and the . . . King of the Left⁷ attacked the Shanyu's heir and set himself up as the new Shanyu [126 B.C.E.]. As a result of this the whole Xiongnu nation was in turmoil and Zhang Qian, along with his Xiongnu wife and the former slave Kanfu, was able to escape and return to China.

The emperor honored Zhang Qian with the post of palace counselor and awarded Kanfu the title of "Lord Who Carries Out His Mission." . . . When Zhang Qian first set out on his mission, he was accompanied by over one hundred men, but after thirteen years abroad, only he and Kanfu managed to make their way back to China. Zhang Qian in person visited the lands of Dayuan, the Great Yuezhi, Daxia, and Kangju, and in addition he gathered reports on five or six other large states in the neighborhood. All of this information he related to the emperor on his return.

➤ Zhang Qian's report contained the following types of information. In the selection that appears below he describes Parthian Persia (Anxi), Mesopotamia (Tiaozi), and India (Shendu), none of which he had personally visited:

Anxi [Parthian Persia] is situated several thousand *li*⁸ west of the region of the Great Yuezhi. The people are settled on the land, cultivating the fields and growing rice and wheat. They also make wine out of grapes.⁹ They have walled cities, . . . the region containing several hundred cities of various sizes. The kingdom . . . is very large, measuring several thousand square *li*. Some

⁴See note 1.

⁵A steppe kingdom located southeast of the Aral Sea and directly north of Bactria (note 6). Today the region forms part of Kazakhstan.

⁶Around 139 B.C.E. the Yuezhi conquered Bactria (Daxia). As we saw in source 31, Bactria was a west Central Asian remnant of the Hellenistic ecumene forged by Alexander the Great and his generals and, until its conquest by the Yuezhi, was governed by Greek-speaking rulers. The Yuezhi later used Bactria as the launching area from which it carved out the Kushana Empire during the late first century B.C.E.

⁷A formerly subordinate Xiongnu prince.

⁸A *li* is a bit more than one-third of a mile.

⁹Grape wine was up to this point apparently unknown in China. Tradition credits Zhang Qian with introducing the grapevine into China. Later Chinese envoys to the West apparently brought back for Chinese cultivation the chive, coriander, cucumbers, figs, sesame, safflower, and walnuts. In return, China sent westward knowledge of how to grow pears, peaches, oranges, roses, peonies, azaleas, camellias, and chrysanthemums. By the mid sixth century C.E. even the secret of silk manufacture had made its way to the eastern Mediterranean.

of the inhabitants are merchants who travel by carts or boats to neighboring countries, sometimes journeying several thousand li. The coins of the country are made of silver and bear the face of the king. When the king dies, the currency is immediately changed and new coins issued with the face of his successor. . . . To the west lies Tiaozhi [Mesopotamia]. . . .

Tiaozhi is situated several thousand li west of Anxi and borders the Western Sea [Persian Gulf?]. It is hot and damp, and the people live by cultivating the fields and planting rice. . . . The people are very numerous and are ruled by many petty chiefs. The ruler of Anxi¹⁰ gives orders to these chiefs and regards them as his vassals. . . .

Southeast of Daxia is the kingdom of Shendu [India]. "When I was in Daxia," Zhang Qian reported, "I saw bamboo canes from Qiong"¹¹ and cloth made in the province of Shu.¹² When I asked the people how they had gotten such articles, they replied, 'Our merchants go to buy them in the markets of Shendu.' Shendu, they told me, lies several thousand li southeast of Daxia. The people cultivate the land and live much like the people of Daxia. The region is said to be hot and damp. The inhabitants ride elephants when they go into battle. The kingdom is situated on a great river.¹³

"We know that Daxia is located twelve thousand li southwest of China. Now if the kingdom of Shendu is situated several thousand li southeast of Daxia and obtains goods that are produced in Shu, it seems to me that it must not be very far from Shu. At present, if we try to send envoys to Daxia by way of the mountain trails that lead through the territory of the Qiang people,¹⁴ they will be molested by the Qiang, while if we

send them a little farther north, they will be captured by the Xiongnu. It would seem that the most direct route, as well as the safest, would be that out of Shu."¹⁵

Thus the emperor learned of Dayuan, Daxia, Anxi, and the others, all great states rich in unusual products whose people cultivated the land and made their living in much the same way as the Chinese. All these states, he was told, were militarily weak and prized Han goods and wealth. He also learned that to the north of them live the Yuexi and Kangju¹⁶ people who were strong in arms but who could be persuaded by gifts and the prospect of gain to acknowledge allegiance to the Han court. If it were only possible to win over these states by peaceful means, the emperor thought, he could then extend his domain ten thousand li, attract to his court men of strange customs who would come translating and retranslating their languages,¹⁷ and his might would become known to all the lands within the four seas.

The emperor was therefore delighted, and approved Zhang Qian's suggestion. He ordered Zhang Qian to start out from . . . Shu on a secret mission to search for Daxia. The party broke into four groups. . . . All the groups managed to advance one or two thousand li, but were blocked on the north by the Di and Tso tribes and on the south by the Sui and Kunming tribes. The Kunming tribes have no rulers but devote themselves to plunder and robbery, and as soon as they seized any of the Han envoys they immediately murdered them. Thus none of the parties was ever able to get through to its destination. They did learn, however, that some one thousand or more li to the west there was a state called Tianyue¹⁸ whose people rode elephants and that

¹⁰The Parthian monarchs Phraates II (r. 138–127 B.C.E.) and Artabanus I (r. 127–124).

¹¹Qiongzhou in Szechwan province in southwest China.

¹²China's Szechwan province.

¹³Probably a reference to the Indus River.

¹⁴A Tibetan mountain people.

¹⁵In other words, in order to avoid the Xiongnu and the Qiang, Zhang Qian proposes traveling to Daxia by way of India.

¹⁶Another nomadic people (see note 5).

¹⁷Having no knowledge of Chinese, they would need to communicate through a series of intermediary languages.

¹⁸Probably Burma (modern Myanmar), which today borders China's Yunnan province; in the late second century B.C.E. Yunnan was not yet fully part of China and would not be for centuries to come. Burma, therefore, was a distant and mysterious land.

the merchants with their goods. In this way to Daxia, from the domain of Tiaozhi. Earlier the king had been at war with the b

¹⁹Smuggling.

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the merchants from Shu sometimes went there
with their goods on unofficial trading missions.¹⁹
In this way the Han, while searching for a route
to Daxia, first came into contact with the king-
dom of Tian.

Earlier the Han had tried to establish relations
with the barbarians of the southwest, but the

¹⁹Smuggling.

expense proved too great and no road could be
found through the region and so the project was
abandoned. After Zhang Qian reported that it
was possible to reach Daxia by traveling through
the region of the southwestern barbarians, the
Han once more began efforts to establish rela-
tions with the tribes in the area.

The Transit of Images along the Silk Road

44 ▼ FOUR ROBED STATUES

The most visible manifestation of this first age of Afro-Eurasian interchange was the manner in which artistic motifs and styles traveled across the four major cultural pools, especially from west to east. As these ideas and forms moved from one region to another, they were reshaped and blended with native elements to produce striking examples of syncretic art. The four sculptures that appear here illustrate the way in which a Greco-Roman artistic style traveled from the Mediterranean to China between the late first century B.C.E. and the fifth century C.E.

As is evident in *The Gaul and Wife* and *The Old Woman* in source 31, Hellenistic sculptors were masters at carving draped clothing that defined the human body concealed beneath. The creator of our first statue, *Caesar Augustus as Pontifex Maximus*, uses the emperor's draped robes as a means of evoking a mood of drama and mystery while simultaneously proclaiming Augustus's vitality and stolidity. This sculpture, crafted by an unknown eastern Mediterranean artist around 20 B.C.E., portrays Emperor Caesar Augustus in the fullness of his civil and religious power. As head of the Roman state, Augustus held the office of *Pontifex Maximus* (Chief Priest) and was responsible for presiding over Rome's major religious ceremonies. No member of the empire could gaze on this sculpture and not realize that the emperor embodied all of the Roman state's sacred authority.

Our second sculpture comes from Parthia. In 171 B.C.E. the Parthians, an Iranian steppe people, replaced the Macedonian Seleucids as masters of Persia and Mesopotamia and established an empire that lasted to 226 C.E. Although creative in military and administrative matters, the Parthians seem to have been content to be inheritors rather than innovators in the fine arts. As a consequence, their rise did not result in any immediate repudiation of the Hellenistic forms of artistic expression that had been a part of the fabric of Persian civilization since the late fourth century B.C.E. The Parthian Empire, however, bordered Central Asia, which meant that Parthian culture was a rich combination of many elements, of which Mediterranean Hellenism was only one.

The sculpture represented here of a woman in Iranian dress dates from the late second or early third century C.E. and illustrates a typical Parthian blend of Greco-Roman and Iranian components. It is one of over one hundred similar votive