

## The Parthians between Rome and China

Gan Ying's mission into the West (1st century AD)

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### Abstract

Following the expansion westwards of the Chinese Han Empire at the end of the 1st century AD the Parthian kingdom entered China's political horizon. Gan Ying, a Chinese envoy was at the head of a diplomatic mission charged with establishing direct contacts and business relationships with the Roman Empire, the final destination for most of the goods they were exporting to the West. Gan Ying was able to reach Arsacid-controlled south Mesopotamia. Although very close to the Roman territory he did not manage to go further and accomplish his task. The Parthian leaders, well aware of the commercial role they played between Rome and China, dissuaded him from trying to proceed. This largely unknown but extremely interesting episode in the ancient history of Asia provides direct evidence concerning the political and commercial role of Parthia, Rome's fierce enemy, in central Asia and along the Silk Route.

At the beginning of the 1940s the sinologist Homer H. Dubs speculated on the possibility that the small unit of one hundred men in "fish scale" formation which, according to Chinese sources was crushed by the Han cavalry at the Talas River battle in eastern Kazakhstan (36 BC), may have been formed by Roman legionaries cap-

tured by Parthians during the battle of Carrhae several years before (53 BC) and used as mercenaries by Zhizhi, a chieftain of the Xiongnu barbarians<sup>1</sup>. According to Dubs, these soldiers crossed the Euphrates frontier marking the edge of the Roman domains following Crassus' attempt to conquer Parthia (54 BC). Taken prisoners in the disaster at Carrhae they were sent to the central Asian Arsacid town of Merv (in nowadays eastern Turkmenistan), as stated by Pliny<sup>2</sup>, and employed as mercenaries by local tribes. Finding themselves again on the defeated side at Talas they were later recruited by the Chinese and moved to China.

Despite the fact that that hypothesis was soon considered as merely conjectural, with the general interest that Chinese culture and history aroused in recent years in Europe, Dubs' idea has also found new supporters. In the Liqian village, Yongchang county, north-western China, where the inhabitants claim Roman ancestry, "Roman Festivals" are organized regularly by the local Office of Tourism. Recently some modern writers picked up this fascinating idea using it as a background setting for some quite successful novels<sup>3</sup>.

Rome and China, the Empire of the eagle and that of the dragon were the two main states of the ancient world. They still constitute the "Empires" par excellence in the modern minds of Westerners and Asians respectively. They were the first states able to unify all the different local subjects in one stable political structure, deeply influencing the culture and civilization in those two different parts of the world. For this reason their model of state has remained alive over the centuries in both Europe and Asia as a source of inspiration for all the political subjects which succeeded and which tried to present themselves as legitimate heirs of their historical heritage. The Roman Empire and the Celestial Empire still today incarnate the archetype and historical model for every state structure<sup>4</sup>.

It is thus much more understandable the interest aroused by the possibility of contact and interchange among those political giants, the two cornerstones of historical experience in the West and Far East. The information provided by western sources concerning the importation of silk and other goods to the Roman Empire from the East prove that indirect trade contacts undoubtedly took place. Goods were exchanged among traders along that network of routes later known as the "Silk Road". The merchants active along this route were normally responsible for transporting goods along a de-

terminated portion of the itinerary. Usually they were supported by the political subjects lying on the traffic routes which considered the taxation of goods from the long distance trade between East and West an important source of income<sup>5</sup>.

The most important and powerful of these political subjects lying in a strategic position on the route connecting Roman territories with China was the Parthian Empire<sup>6</sup>

The kingdom of the Parthians (*Anxi* in the Chinese sources) was established a few decades after Alexander's death (in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC), in central Asia, close to the remotest borders of the Seleucid Empire. Its monarchs were members of the Arsacid dynasty and were able to gain the best advantages from the weakening of the house of Seleucos and the consequent disintegration of that huge Hellenistic state. They managed to spread their control over large territories of Southern Asia. The Parthian mounted armies, after overrunning the whole Iranian plateau, Babylonia and Mesopotamia, stopped on the eastern bank of the Euphrates river, western limit of the Arsacid expansion (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC). The Arsacid rule stretched from the Euphrates to north-western India, including Mesopotamia, Iran and all the territories lying between the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean to the south and the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus to the north.

Since then for more than three centuries Rome's expansionist goals in Mesopotamia and in the East were fiercely opposed by the Parthians.

The city of Selucia on the Tigris, a rich and populated metropolis close to the most vital centres of the Arsacid kingdom<sup>7</sup>, was the fundamental reference point in the sphere of movements of men and goods between the Eastern Parthian provinces, central Asia and Roman Syria. From the Hellenistic metropolis, the route headed northwards to the ancient Parthian capitals of the Northern Iranian plateau. Past them, beyond the extreme foothills of the Arsacid territory, lay the boundless Asian steppes. Heading north the road proceeded toward Ekbatana, Rhagai, Nisa and Merv, the *Mu-lu* of Chinese sources<sup>8</sup>.

In Merv, the Silk Route, leaving the Arsacid domains, forked into two distinct branches, to the north and south of the Taklamakun desert respectively. Having crossed the desert they remerged near the Altaj Mountains and thereby entered the territory controlled by

the Chinese Authority<sup>9</sup>. Very likely the merchants, subjects of the Great King, were responsible for the transport from Eastern Turkestan to Seleucia<sup>10</sup>. As is easily understandable, it was necessary, in order to ensure the continuation of such activity and the massive profits for the Arsacid administration, to impede any relationship between the two main trading partners, China and Rome, and avoid a trade agreement between the two Empires, which would exclude the Parthian merchants from the long-distance caravan trade.

Of course many merchants were active along those trade routes and some of them provided information about the remote lands they visited, which the Roman as well as the Chinese annalists and geographers needed for their works. One of the most valuable sources despite being largely unknown, is the account provided by a Chinese envoy. It concerns the travel undertaken by an official Chinese diplomatic mission which was able to reach regions no Chinese diplomat had been able to visit before. The report constitutes one of the few first hand evidences from a traveller along the Silk Route and sheds light on the fundamental role played by the Parthians as an insuperable political obstacle for communications between the two Empires.

With the campaigns to the West and the ensuing extension of the frontier of the Han state, operated by the Chinese General Ban Zhao (between 91 and 101 AD) and by his son Ban Yong, the Parthian Kingdom entered the political scene of the Celestial Empire<sup>11</sup>. The goal of the Asian leader was to extend Chinese control along the Central-Asian commercial routes in order to preserve their efficiency and impede the nomadic tribes (like the Huns, *Hsiung-nu* in Chinese sources) from interrupting the connections with the West by which Chinese silk reached the Parthian border or the Indian ports. After some major military campaigns the Chinese were able to reopen the Silk Route and restore a direct contact by land between China and the Parthian Empire<sup>12</sup>.

But Ban Zhao's plans were even more ambitious. Around 97 AD, Ban Zhao placed an important dignitary named Gan Ying at the head of a diplomatic mission charged to do all that was possible to establish contacts and business relationships with that realm which the Chinese knew well to be the final destination for most of the goods they were exporting to the West - the Kingdom of Da Quin: the Roman Empire<sup>13</sup>. His narration was later collected in

the more general historical work, the *Hou Hanshou*, the official annals of the Later Hans<sup>14</sup>.

Gan Ying states that the westernmost place his mission was able to reach was the country of *Tiaozhi*, which most modern scholars identify as Mesene, on the northern shores of the Persian Gulf, arrival point of the sea routes from the Indian subcontinent<sup>15</sup>.

The exposition of the anthropic and topographic characteristics of the region provided by Gan Ying shares some elements with the description of Mesene in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* some years earlier<sup>16</sup>. In antiquity that land was known as being the seat of the Arsacid vassal kingdom of Characene<sup>17</sup>, a political situation also reported in the earlier Chinese historical descriptions of the region<sup>17</sup>.

According to Gan Ying's report it seems that in those years the Parthian Great King's control over the country had been enforced. A passage in the *Hou Hanshou* states: «Later on, *Anxi* (the Arsacid kingdom) conquered, and subjugated *Tiaozhi* (Characene). They have, in fact, installed a Senior General there to supervise all the small towns» (Transl. J.E. Hill)<sup>19</sup>.

Gan Ying seems to record a precise political situation. The Arsacids seem to have militarily occupied the entire area, transforming Mesene into a Parthian Satrapy and nominating an Army official as responsible for the points of major economic interest: the cities and river harbours<sup>20</sup>.

From the dates reported by Ban Zhao's envoy it is possible to conclude that the gap of monetary emissions of the independent kingdom Characene that took place in those years was due to a military or even political occupation of the client potentate. Characene harbours had in that period become Arsacid harbours and the authority that regulated and controlled the commercial traffic and transactions depended directly on the Great King or on his military representative in the area. Given the goals of Gan Ying's mission it would predictably have been unfruitful, in search of collaboration, to turn to the members of the ruling Arsacid class in Ctesiphon, the fulcrum of the State of *Anxi*<sup>21</sup>. As the Chinese seemed to know well<sup>22</sup>, the Arsacid leadership would never have facilitated contact between the two greatest economic powers of the known world, one the producer, the other the main purchaser, of most of the goods that travelled across Arsacid territory.

For the Great King it was vital, not only that the two states not be able to entertain reciprocal diplomatic relationships, but it was extremely important to avoid, as much as possible, that the merchants coming from the two Empires should meet. If that had happened the tangible risk would have remained, in the light of the impressive resources and inexhaustible means which the two states would have had, that an agreement and a direct collaboration between the Romans and Chinese would have excluded the Parthian merchants from the long-distance trade between East and West, depriving them of their role as mediators and of the high earnings related to the difference between the sale and purchase costs, and the Arsacid crown of the substantial revenue derived from the taxation of the transported goods<sup>23</sup>.

It is easy to comprehend how it would have seemed more reasonable, to Ban Zhao and his entourage, in order to gain collaboration in the attempt to reach the Roman territory, turning to merchants and ruling classes of a Kingdom, that of Characene, who during the previous years had demonstrated a considerable openness towards foreign economic initiatives, as well as a conspicuous independence from Arsacid directives. Unfortunately for Gan Ying and his explorative mission, upon their arrival in Mesene, the region had been occupied by the Great King's troops who had put an end to the Characene trade apogee and to a phase of wide political autonomy.

In the occupied lower-Mesopotamia it is likely that the officials and merchants with whom the Chinese mission was in contact were governmental agents or men properly trained to provide information and answers in line with Arsacid interest. The Great King Pacorus II (?), perhaps the most attentive of all the monarchs to the economic revival of his kingdom, anxious to re-establish fruitful contacts with the Celestial Empire could not risk the degeneration of the relationships between the two Empires – by preventing the diplomats from crossing his territory – but he nonetheless possessed the means for causing, discreetly, their mission to fail.

In fact, the report of Gan Ying continues:

He reached Tiaozhi next to a large sea. He wanted to cross it, but the sailors of the western frontier of Anxi (Parthia) said to him: "The ocean is huge. Those making the round

trip can do it in three months if the winds are favourable. However, if you encounter winds that delay you, it can take two years. That is why all the men who go by sea take stores for three years. The vast ocean urges men to think of their country, and get homesick, and some of them die (Transl. J.E. Hill)<sup>24</sup>.

Therefore, the informants exploited to their advantage the absolute ignorance of the maritime routes to Roman Egypt, about which Gan Ying was asking, deliberately multiplying the days necessary for the crossing, and making sure not to inform the Chinese of the possibility of reaching via land - by simply following the Euphrates - the nearby border with the Roman province of Syria.

Deterred from continuing by such nefarious news, Gan Ying resolved to return to his homeland and report what had happened. After the failed attempt of Ban Zhao, the Chinese leadership decided to renew the agreements with the Parthians already established at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC during the era of Emperor Wu (145-87 BC), accepting the proposal that the Great King had presented during the ambassadorship in 87 AD. To seal the renewed business harmony, Pacorus II, remembered in Chinese sources with the name of Manju - sent a series of gifts to the Chinese ruler, among which were lions and birds from the Mesene marshes (101 AD)<sup>25</sup>.

Recent historical research has been able to substantially improve our knowledge of the Parthian Empire. The contribution of Chinese sources in general and Gan Ying's report in particular has been relevant. It seems evident that the Parthian leadership conceived a well-defined policy concerning the long distance trade thorough central Asia, a policy which aimed at strengthening its role of mediation between Rome and China.

Modern scholars dealing with the Parthian state managed to shed light on the structure and the policy of the Arsacid kingdom beyond the stereotyped description provided by western sources. From the shadows of ancient history is thus gradually emerging another powerful Empire lying between the Roman and Chinese ones: a bitter enemy to the former and a cunning trade antagonist for the latter.

## Notes

- 1 Dubbs, 1941; Dubbs, 1942; Dubbs 1957.
- 2 Plin., *Nat. Hist.*, VI, 47.
- 3 For example Valerio Massimo Manfredi's *Empire of Dragons*, (2005) about a Roman soldier captured along with Emperor Valerian by the Persians and his journey to China after he escapes and Michael E. Anderson's, *The Parthian Interpreter* (2007), about the journey of a Roman senator and his Parthian slave to China during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.
- 4 Starting a quite successful tradition of comparative historical studies: Roberts, 2003; Edwards, 2005; Hui, 2008; Mittag, Mutschler, 2008; Scheidel, 2009.
- 5 Map: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/numismatics/parthia/frames/pamaec.htm>
- 6 In general on the history of the Parthian Kingdom: Debevoise 1938; Schippmann 1980; Bivar 1983; Dabrowa 1983; Frye 1984; Wolski 1993; Wiesehöfer 1994. On the sources the recent Hack, Jacobs and Weber, 2010.
- 7 Strab., XVI, 2. 5; Plut., *Crass.*, 32; Plin., *Nat. Hist.*, VI, 122; Paus., I, 6. 3.
- 8 Isidor. *Mans. Parth.*, c. 7-14; *Hou Hanschou*, c. 88. 2918; Chaumont 1973 ; Walser 1985.
- 9 Choisnel, 2004, 63-65.
- 10 Parthia imported slaves, raw silk, steel, Plin., *Nat. Hist.*, XV, 44; XXXIV, 145. Among the exportations were the horses of Media, high esteemed in China where they were called "celestial horses". Haussig 1992, 126-130; J. Wiesehöfer, 2001. The merchants met in a place called "Stone Tower", Plin., *Nat. Hist.*, VI, 54-55; Loewe 1971.
- 11 Chavannes, 1906, 216-245; Chavannes 1907, 177-178; Grosso 1966, 157-161; Wolski 1993, 16; Choisnel 2004, 147-149, 152-153.
- 12 Chavannes, 1906, 228-233; Grosso 1966, 163-167.
- 13 Choisnel 2004, 153-154.
- 14 *Hou Hanschou*, c. 88. 2918; *The Annal of the Later Hans*, written between the 4th and the 5th century AD utilising as sources mainly imperial officer's reports from the previous periods of the Han dynasty. Chavannes, 1906, 214 ; Chavannes 1907, 149-151; Leslie and Gardiner 1984, 282-284.
- 15 Chavannes 1907, 177-178; Posch 1998, 361.
- 16 Plin., *Nat. Hist.*, VI, 125; 136.



- 17 Concerning Characene remain fundamental : Nodelmann 1960 and Schuol 2000.
- 18 *Shiji*, cap. 123. 3163; *Shiji* is a dynastic chronicle written in the 1st century BC by Sima Qian; Chavannes 1907, 176-177; Grosso 1966, 167-169; Leslie and Gardiner 1984, 268-270; Posch 1998, 357-359; Tao 2007, 88-92.
- 19 *Hou Hanshou*, c. 88. 2918.
- 20 Dealing with the Chinese sources the scholar must be really careful since later writers used to re-elaborate information given by early historians mixing them with new accounts.
- 21 Leslie and Gardiner 1984, 287-288.
- 22 *Hou Hanshou*, c. 88. 2919: «The king of this country [DaQuin = Roman Empire] always wanted to send envoys to the Han, but Anxi (Parthia), wishing to control the trade in multi-coloured Chinese silks, blocked the route to prevent [the Romans] getting through [to China]».
- 23 Alam, 2004, 55.
- 24 *Hou Hanshou*, cap. 88. 2918; Chavannes 1907, 177-178 ; Grosso 1966, 169; Tao 2007, 99-101.
- 25 *Hanshou*, c. 4. 168.

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