



Beyond frontiers: Ancient Rome and the Eurasian trade networks



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ABSTRACT

During the second half of the 19th century, the Roman Empire was already considered one of the key players inside the Eurasian networks. This research focuses on four relevant points. From a historiographical perspective, the reconstruction of the trading routes represented a central theme in the history of the relationship between the Roman Empire and the Far East. Imagining a plurality of itineraries and combinations of overland and sea routes, it is possible to reconstruct a complex reality in which the Eurasian networks during the Early Roman Empire developed. As far as economics is concerned, new documentation demonstrates the wide range and the extraordinary impact of the Eastern products on Roman markets. A final focus on the process of Chinese silk unravelling and reweaving provides an important clue on how complex and absolutely not mono-directional were the interactions and the exchanges in the Eurasian networks during the first centuries of the Roman Empire.

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1. Introduction

At the very beginning of the scientific debate over the 'Silk Roads', during the second half of the 19th century, the Roman Empire was already considered one of the key players inside the Eurasian networks.¹ Over the 20th century, as new evidence has come to light, and new approaches have been applied, the various interpretations and evaluations of the 'Roman Empire factor' have changed considerably. It is not possible to provide a full picture of this incredibly multi-faceted history of studies;² however, I will try to offer an overview by focusing on four points which seem to be par-

ticularly relevant to explain the Eurasian inter-connectivity with the Rome during the first three centuries of the Empire.

2. A historiographical premise.
3. Imperial Rome and the trans-Eurasian trade networks
4. The impact of Far East trade on Roman economics: new evidence
5. From China to Rome – from Rome to China: a short focus on Silk and Silk Roads

2. A historiographical premise

From a historiographical perspective, it must be stressed that 'the invention of the Silk Roads' was from the very beginning deeply associated with the History of the Roman Empire. In colonial discourse of the last three decades of the 19th century, the Roman Empire represented for the European nations the first experience of imperialistic

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¹ On historiography of the Silk Roads: Waugh (2010); Chin (2013). On universal empires: Bang and Kolodziejczyk (2012).

² On Roman Empire and Eurasia: Christian (2000); Parker (2002); Fitzpatrick (2011); Galli (2011); Seland (2013, 2014).

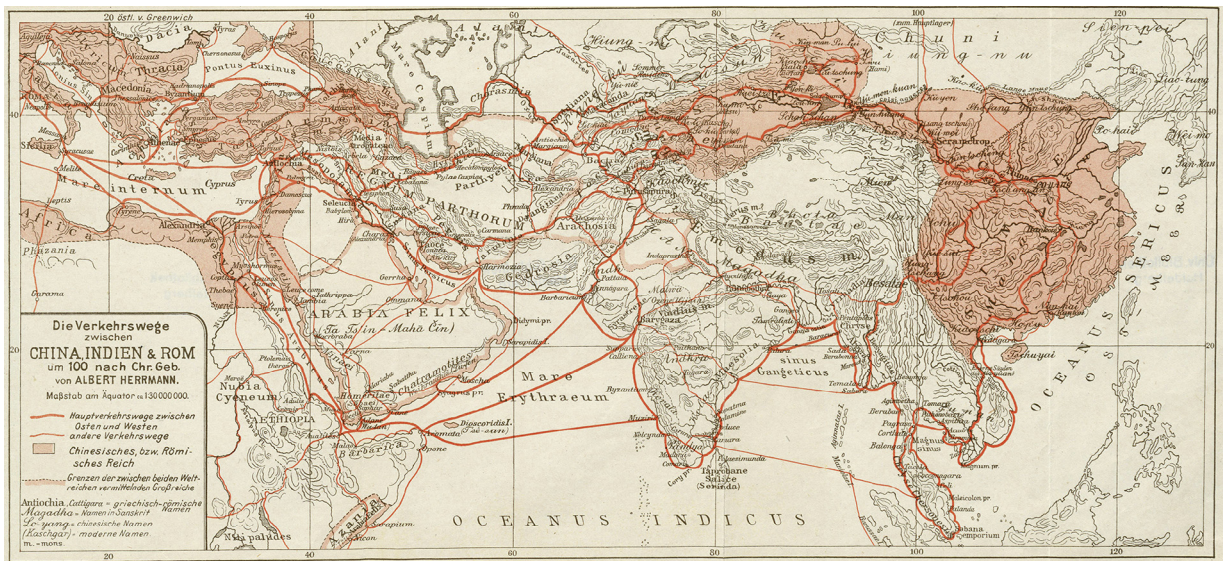


Fig. 1. Map of the Silk Roads (Herrmann, 1922).

hegemony in world history.³ This was due to its extension, its duration and, last but not least, its supposed civilising impetus. For this reason, in the pioneering studies on the 'Silk Roads' by German geographer and geologist Ferdinand P.W. von Richthofen (1833–1905) and, later on, in the works of Albert Herrman (1886–1945), we can find in-depth analysis of the relationships between the Central Asia/Far East and the West on the backdrop of the Roman domination over the Mediterranean.

Both in the famous 1877 article *About the Central Asia Silk Roads till the 2nd century AD* and in the dedicated chapter in the first volume *China. Results of his own travels* Richthofen approached the interactions between the Far East and the Roman Empire with a detailed analysis of the most important ancient sources (von Richthofen, 1877a: chapter 10, esp. 446–501). His philological approach is clearly expressed in the 1877 article: "While we shine a light there (scil. Central Asia) over the extended territories, it is crucial to simultaneously look back at the classical sources that already described the same places and the same communication routes, where the trade was taking place at that time" (von Richthofen, 1877b: 97; English transl. M. Galli).

Richthofen's analysis is not simply focused on retracing the geographical and/or commercial aspects of the Silk Roads. The contacts and exchanges between the Roman Provinces and the political entities of Central and Eastern Asia are the unequivocal proof of the extraordinary activity of the trans-Eurasian networks (Hirth, 1885; Raschke, 1978; Seland, 2014). Moreover, these contacts prove the exceptional mobility and the great success in terms of economic profitability throughout the history of the Silk Roads.

The focus here is on the two opposite poles of this geographical and political system: the ancient Rome of the early centuries of the Empire (1st to 3rd century CE) and the Han dynasty in China (Scheidt, 2009). From the 2nd century CE, thanks to the expansion of the Han dynasty kingdom in

Central Asia, it is the start of a flourishing period: "Where the greatest World Empires (Weltreiche) – the Chinese and the Roman one, for a short period almost brushed against each other" (von Richthofen, 1877b: 107; English transl. M. Galli).

According to the German scholar's conclusions, from 114 BCE to 120 CE (with a 56-year break in between) the Chinese sent their precious silk goods with caravans to the West in order to reach the city of Samarcanda. From here some would split and head towards Indian ports, passing through the Oxus territories; others would take the overland route through Parthia to get to the final destination, i.e. the Roman markets. Richthofen is conclusive: "Especially the markets of the Roman Empire became a great territory where to make great profits and gains" (von Richthofen, 1877b).

The study of the connections between Rome and Eurasia was further developed in a consistent way by the archaeologist and historical geographer Herrmann, who was one of Richthofen's students.⁴ Herrmann's cartographic reproduction (Fig. 1) fulfilled the need to visualise in a clear and detailed way the very complex networks where the overland routes and the maritime routes would intertwine in the most intricate combinations. This geographical and geological frame was significantly integrated with the latest archaeological discoveries of those years. All these new extraordinary finds introduced the wider archaeological perspective of the 'material culture' of the Silk Roads.

Almost a century after this pioneering phase of great scientific turmoil, the theme of 'Roman Empire and the Eurasian networks' is still of great relevance today. Adopting

³ On Colonialism and Classics: Goff (2005). On creation of 'Silk Roads': Chin (2013).

⁴ The titles of his works are quite self-explanatory: *The Ancient Roads between China and Syria* published in 1910; *The Silk Roads from Ancient China to the Roman Empire* in 1915; *The Trade Roads between China, India and Rome about 100 AD*: Herrmann (1922).

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