

Chinese Historical Records and Sino-Roman Relations: A Critical Approach to Understand Problems on the Chinese Reception of the Roman Empire

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Abstract

It has long been known that Chinese records provide a considerable amount of information on Daqin 大秦 i. e. Great Qin [synonym of Roman Empire in Chinese records]. Nevertheless, interpretation of these accounts requires a more coherent nexus. Apart from problems of authenticity of written works, characteristics of Chinese historiography and other genres should also be considered. In light of such complexities, grouping Chinese sources on Daqin by relevance, type (e. g. historiographies or geographical treaties etc.) and date (referring to events before or after the 5th/6th century) might lead towards a better understanding of multifaceted perceptions defined by their description.

In this manner, through a comparison of Daqin-picture(s) given by these accounts with a review of Roman and Roman-related archaeological finds discovered in China, the paper aims to give a more sophisticated interpretation of the reception of Rome in the Middle Empire and also intends to highlight problems on understanding Sino-Roman relations.

Keywords: Chinese records; Authenticity; Sino-Roman relations; Roman artefacts; Reception of Antiquity.

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Chinese Historical Records and Sino-Roman Relations A Critical Approach to Understand Problems on the Chinese Reception of the Roman Empire¹

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*Introduction*²

It has long been known that Chinese records provide a considerable amount of information on Daqin 大秦 i. e. Great Qin [synonym of Roman Empire in Chinese accounts].³ However, it is important to take into account that despite the large variety and relative abundance of information, the relevance and reliability of these Chinese sources largely depends – among many others – on diverse natures of different works. Furthermore, the great distance and indirect contacts between Rome and China with the second- and third-hand information and vague knowledge on the West also has a great impact on the authenticity of these accounts. For the above reasons, although it is a matter of course to use such heavy materials to draw the Chinese picture of Rome, any approach to these sources requires a complex and careful analysis wherein interdisciplinarity – most significantly results of archaeology – should also play an important role.

Therefore, disregarding peculiar parameters of Chinese works and neglecting archaeological data might lead towards a rather unilateral image of Rome in the Far East.⁴ By the same token, besides Chinese written materials, using Antique descriptions on the easternmost edge of the Oikumene altogether with Chinese- and Roman-interpreted archaeological finds are also essential to get a better understanding on Sino-Roman relations.⁵

Regarding the many difficulties from various problems of different disciplines, there have been only a few attempts on the integrative study of Chinese records along with archaeological finds.

In this manner, grouping Chinese sources on Daqin by relevance, type (e. g. historiographies or geographical treaties etc.) and date (referring to events before or after the 5th/6th century) in order to get distinct perceptions defined by their description, might serve as a significant standpoint towards a more complex research.

¹ The original manuscript is a chapter of the author's PhD dissertation submitted in 2015.

² I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Ruth Shaffrey for her valuable comments.

³ For etymological approach see e.g.: Lieu 2016, 123-125, 133-138; Speidel 203-204.

⁴ Although analyses of texts and artefacts should play an equally important role in approaching Chinese views of the Roman Empire, due to diverse research problems of these different kinds of materials, written sources and archaeological data need to be studied separately but not exclusively.

⁵ For this see: Hoppál 2015 and 2017/2018.

Grouping written materials on Daqin

Since the term Daqin was used for a remarkably long time, it is essential to differentiate descriptions presumably indicating the Roman Empire from typically later texts of the 6th–8th centuries wherein Daqin was partly or fully referring to the Βασιλεία τῶν Ῥωμαίων. Furthermore, the length of use which resulted in the confusion of the exact meaning of the Daqin expression within contemporary Chinese society, means it is exceptionally difficult to define the degree of Roman- and Byzantine-related data in these later works.

Nevertheless, in order to get a better knowledge of the Chinese image of Daqin and to understand what factors might took part in its formation, it is important to distinguish these two great source groups. It can be generally assumed that in texts referring to events before the 5th century Daqin mainly connected to the Roman Empire⁶, while in sources referring to events after the 6th century – as intercultural connections started to flourish and the flow of information has increased – Daqin descriptions bear many new details partly or fully related to the Βασιλεία τῶν Ῥωμαίων. For this reason, an artificial demarcation separating sources referring to events before the 5th century and from the 6th century onwards has been established. At the same time, regarding complexity of these texts and problems on separating factual, fictional, moral and philosophical aspects of Daqin-related information, such demarcation can merely be considered as an artificial line on the time axis which has great importance for both the Roman and the Byzantine Empires. In this manner, a nominal act within the 5th century, the year 480 AD was chosen, when emperor Zeno declared the unity of the two halves of the Roman Empire (namely the Eastern and Western parts).

Through grouping these sources by relevance, type and the time they refer to, it is possible to form temporal and spatial patterns of perceptions. (Fig 1)

A possible structure of Daqin accounts referring to the period before the 5th century

Among sources referring to events before the 5th century several types can be determined. The most important categories of works related to Daqin are the following: historiographical works, geographical descriptions, exotica, encyclopedic collections, supernatural stories and legends, augural books, poetry, Buddhist sutras and Taoist scriptures.⁷ These various genres contain different qualities and quantities of information and are of different levels of importance. As a result, two more subgroups concerning factual details can be formed within texts related to this early date, namely historiographical works and 'Other texts'.

⁶ In case of historical records, even if they were edited hundreds of years after the actual events, rewriting was minimal. Although one might assume the contrary, many argue that the below detailed nature of these late-compiled historiographies does not allow to mingle recent information with the description of period they referring to. See e.g. Pulleyblank 1981, 181; Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 20.

⁷ Naming the above genres providing information on Daqin is partly based on Yu Taishan 2013, while grouping these materials by date and relevance is merely an attempt by the author. In this manner, the above categorization in many aspects differs from classifications given by the Siku Quanshu 四庫全書 etc. For this see e.g. Wilkinson 2000, 270. By the same token, it might not meet with general distinctions between truth telling and fabrication. See, e.g. Plaks 2014, 316-320.

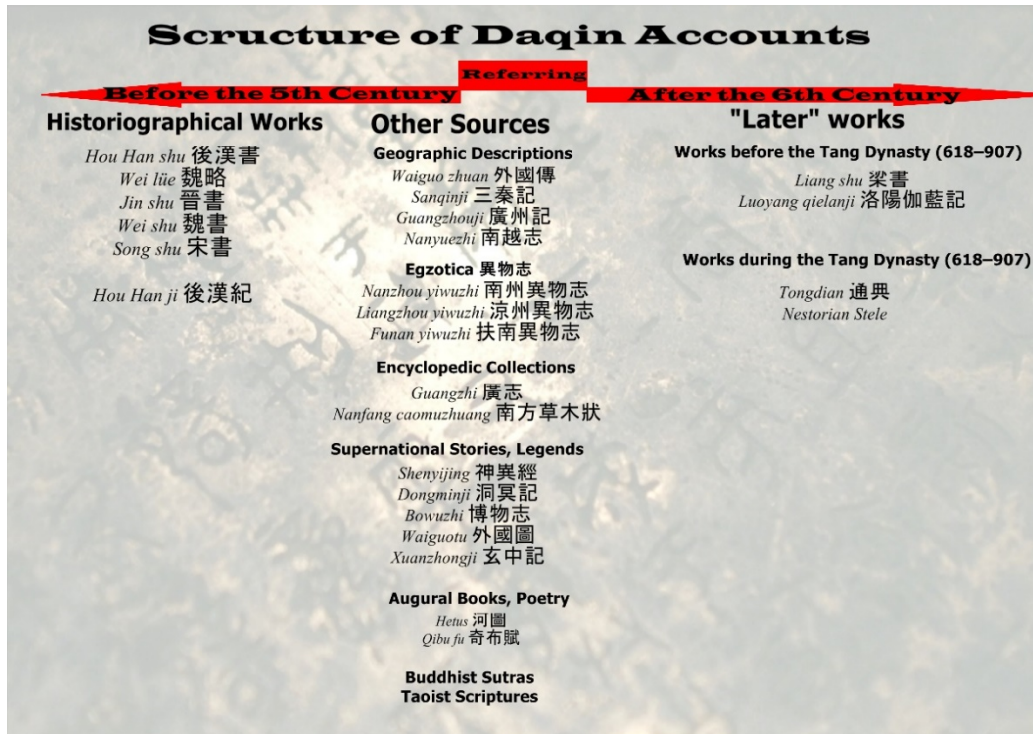


Fig. 1

Historiographical works and the 'Others'

Historiographies are considered to be verbal accounts of the past in a narrated form, often with certain formal characteristics (Yu 1988, 2). As a result of factual and verifiable features of history, these works must contain elements of reality, or at least 'an intellectual direction towards an objective reality' (Li 2000/2001, 183). Such parameters clearly differentiate the two disciplines (Yu 1988, 3).⁸ Or as Li (2000/2001, 187) has pointed out, 'truth as an epistemological concept in literary works is unnecessary'. However, it is important to keep in mind that – as Plaks (2014, 313) has stated – the significance of the term truth in the Chinese context is always something subjective and relative, directly limited to a specific human perspective.

In contrast, in the subgroup of 'Other works' (such as geographical treatise, sutras etc.) discussing reality is optional, and the role of fabrication and subjectivity might be greater in them. Therefore – in many aspects – these works are closer to literary than historical.

Many of the historiographies and the 'Other works' – with Kao's (1985, 1) words – can be characterized by a distinct kind of intertextuality which can be described as a reference to some often canonical texts with a spirit of modelling and emulation. Forms, quality and rate of such assimilation of earlier models (or pre-texts) might depend on genre-connected, intellectual, aesthetic etc. nature of the new text.

⁸ Furthermore, kongyan 空言 i.e. 'empty words' or 'theoretical judgments' also play an important role in historiographical works. For meaning of kongyan see: Watson 1958, 87-89.

Some thoughts on Chinese historiography in general

Most detailed accounts of Daqin from before the 5th century can be found in the following historiographical works: the Hou Han ji 後漢紀 and four (plus one) of the standard histories.

Despite the relatively great number of private historical writings (Wilkinson 2000, 492), the vast majority of historiographical works were written by officials for officials (Balázs 1976, 189), who can be regarded as users rather than the researchers of culture and historical processes (Lü 呂 and Tong 童 1963, 101). Therefore, historiographies could only be analyzed and interpreted through a careful approach.

These works chiefly concentrate on affairs of state and analysis of political liaisons strongly connected to bureaucratic and Confucian ethics. A significant goal of historiographies called zhengtong 正統 was the effort to legitimize new dynasties, which defined the possibility and order of documents being incorporated into these compilations. Furthermore, officials were submitted to the baobian 褒貶 or praise and blame method, as they were using Confucian moral principles as a yardstick during the compilation process (Balázs 1976, 186; Wilkinson 2000, 490-491). While the bixiao 筆削, to keep the useful and to cut off the useless method resulted in a theoretical framework utilized by compilers to organize fitting data and to screen-out irrelevant or conflicting with the idea (Honey 1990, 168).

In consequence, as Li (2000/2001, 188) has pointed out, 'ideological preconditions and related intellectual techniques predetermine the nature and function of traditional Chinese historiographic writings by systematically mixing factual, fictive and axiological elements together.'

Although the above listed details are well known characteristics of Chinese historiography, their impact on authenticity has not been fully considered in many cases when approaching Daqin-records.

Standard Histories and their reliability

One of the most important and most cited materials of Sino-Roman relations is the subcategory of so called standard histories.⁹ These specific types of Chinese historiographies carry a considerable amount of information on Daqin, although due to their specific features, it is important to take into account the various problems of interpretation and authenticity.¹⁰

Regarding texts on Daqin provided by standard histories referring to events before the 5th century, the following works can be considered as main sources of Daqin-perceptions:

⁹ In many aspects, the twenty-five official histories only give special focus to the spatial centre of Chinese civilisation. See: Chang 1981, 158.

¹⁰ A more recent analysis: Kolb and Speidel 2015, 133-140. Kolb and Speidel 2017, 40-50.

Hou Han shu 後漢書,¹¹ the Jin shu 晉書,¹² the Wei shu 魏書,¹³ and the Song shu 宋書¹⁴ and in many aspects the Wei lüe 魏略.¹⁵ Special details of standard histories affecting Daqin perceptions have been analyzed in many great publications,¹⁶ thus only a short review of some main characteristics will be presented below.

Unlike many other historiographies, these works were all compiled by a nominal chief editor and other officials of the Bureau of Archives. (Puett 2014, 43) Compilers greatly relied on materials collected during the previous dynasties and the different groups of chapters were formed to satisfy various purposes to show a different point of view (Loewe 2008, 3–4). Since, in many cases, alternative sources were lacking, the officials used archaic data from the archives of former dynasties or based them on earlier sources by means of the cut-and-paste method (Wilkinson 2000, 501-507). Moreover, elements of prejudice, stylisation, exaggeration and dramatisation can also be detected (Mansvelt Beck 1990, 3) as well as historical mistakes and misunderstandings.

Information on Barbarians and other foreign nations usually took place in the liezhuan 列傳, the section of biographies, and in the monographs called zhi 志. As Honey (1990, 163) has pointed out, concerning characteristics of nomads appeared in liezhuan, these biographies generally contain a large set of 'topoi (stereotypical situations) standardized for each strand of the Confucian social fabric.' Similarly to accounts of nomads in liezhuan, Daqin-descriptions might also be expected to confirm a predetermined role and to contain a set of patterned formulas.

Perceptions of Daqin in Historiographical works¹⁷

In historiographies and typically in standard histories the Roman Empire is pictured in various clichés and stereotypical topoi.¹⁸ Although these works provide a considerably detailed description of the geography, administration, trade and economy, including agriculture, domesticated animals and products etc. of Daqin, all these passages are

¹¹ Hou Han shu: Juan liushiliu Nan man Nan yi Liezhuan di qishiliu 後漢書:卷八十六南蠻西南夷列傳第七十六 and Hou Han shu: Juan bashiba Xiyuzhuan di qishiba, 後漢書:卷八十八西域傳第七十八. For originals see e.g.: Hirth 1885, 101-102.

¹² Jin shu: Juan jiushiqi Liezhuan di liushiqi Si yu zhuan 晉書:卷九十七 列傳第六十七 四夷傳. For originals see e.g.: Hirth 1885, 97-101.

¹³ Wei shu: Juan yibaier [yi] Liezhuan di Jiushi Xi yu 魏書: 卷一百二 (一) 列傳第九十西域. For originals see e.g.: Hirth 1885, 103-104.

¹⁴ Song shu: Juan Jiushiqi Liezhuan di wushiqi yi man 宋書: 卷九十七 列傳第五十七 夷蠻. For originals see e.g.: Hirth 1885, 102. For detailed descriptions: Hoppál 2011, 206-269.

¹⁵ San guo zhi: Wei shu sanshi Wu wan Xianbei Dong yi Zhuan di sanshi 三國志: 魏書三十 烏丸鮮卑東夷傳第三十. For original text see e.g.: Hirth 1885, 110–114. Unlike the works above, the Wei lüe is not generally treated as part of the official histories, although in aspects of its structure, quantity and quality of information, this unique source of Daqin can be considered as part of the historical canon. See: Table 30 in Wilkinson 2000, 503-505; Hirth 1885, 13-14; Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 65; etc.

¹⁶ See e.g.: Balázs 1976; Chang 1981; Mansvelt Beck 1990; Wilkinson 2000; Puett 2014 etc.

¹⁷ A detailed analysis of Daqin in standard histories has been published in Hoppál 2011. Therefore, only a short summary will be given here. For some recent works on this topic e.g.: Gong 龔 2003; Kordoses 2008; Hill 2009; Hill Forthcoming; Kolb and Speidel 2015 and 2017; Sevillano-López 2015; Janik 2016 etc. All with further bibliography. On identifications: Michelazzi 2013; Liu 2017; Lieu 2016.

¹⁸ For example, the topoi of *major ex longinquo reverentia* can not only be detected in Daqin records but also in Seres accounts of Roman texts. See in: Bertuccioli 1997.

affected by a combination of factual and fictional elements. Although these works only had second and third-hand data influenced by the great distance and their particular interpretation of the world, it is more significant that they had the claim to make a reasonably complex description about Daqin. In these passages the Roman Empire is a distant, utopian country surrounded by mythical places. The locals are civilized and virtuous, making rare and mysterious products.

'Other Works

One of the most interesting categories providing information on Daqin within 'Other texts' is the group of geographic descriptions. These early geographies were typically written about remote areas or foreign countries some of which were personally visited by compilers of these works. Unfortunately, the originals were lost long ago and only some fragments were cited in much later works. Therefore – as Leslie and Gardiner (1996, 82) have pointed out – since these quotations are not uniform it is difficult to be sure about the exact name and compiler of the work they referred to.

The above mentioned problems typically apply to the *Waiguo zhuan* 外國傳 of the 3rd century composed by Kang Tai 康泰.¹⁹ Stray portions of quotations can only be found in collections dated to the 6th–7th centuries such as the *Shuijing zhu* 水经注, the *Beitang shuchao* 北堂書鈔 etc. These citations of Kang Tai's *Waiguo zhuan* partly repeat or alter information given by standard histories, the *Hou Han shu* in particular. At the same time, new details mostly on plants and daily life can also be traced.

Similarly to Kang Tai's *Waiguo zhuan*, original of the *Sanqinji* 三秦記, probably dated to the early 3rd or 4th century,²⁰ has also been lost, but the work was quoted by the *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 of the 10th century. The cited lines give an alternative version of the Han official, Gan Ying's 甘英 failed trip to Daqin known from the *Hou Han shu* and the *Wei lüe*.

The titles of two works on geography of Guangzhou written by Pei Yuan 裴淵 and Guo Wei 顧微 from the Jin period (265–420) are identical, both was called as *Guangzhouji* 廣州記. Two passages were cited in the *Zhenglei bencao* 證類本草, a medical encyclopedia from the 11th–12th centuries, although it is problematic to distinguish which of the two *Guangzhoujis* was used. Regarding the nature of the *Zhenglei bencao* these short lines only mention a few products unknown from previous Daqin descriptions.²¹

The *Nanyue zhi* 南越志 cited in the *Taiping yulan* was compiled by Shen Huaiyuan 沈懷遠 from the Liu-Song dynasty (420–479) and also add further items to the product list of Daqin.

¹⁹ Other *waiguo zhuans* on remote areas also exist, such as the description of foreign countries of the Wu period 吴时外國傳.

²⁰ The author of the *Sanqinji* is widely accepted to be Xin Shi 辛氏 of the Han dynasty, although some scholars, such as D. D. Leslie and K. H. J. Gardiner suggest the work is referring to the 4th century. Yu 2013, 166; Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 98.

²¹ See: Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 98.

Besides geographical descriptions, collections of exotics and strange customs also provide information on Daqin.²² Similarly to geographical works, originals of these exotica or Yiwuzhis have been lost and were cited by compilations from the Tang dynasty (618–907).

Three important exotica dated to the 3rd–4th centuries mention Daqin,²³ the Nanzhou yiwuzhi 南州異物志 on oddities from the Southern region, the Liangzhou yiwuzhi 涼州異物志 and the Funan yiwuzhi 扶南異物志 on Southern Asia. These works mainly vary passages from standard histories and Kang Tai's Waiguo zhuan. However, they also add new details such as curiosities of Daqin.

Some encyclopaedic collections such as the Guangzhi 廣志 and the Nanfang caomuzhuang 南方草木狀 also give information on Daqin, although authenticity of these texts is even more questionable. The original of the Guangzhi might have been compiled during the 5th–6th centuries but the work only remained as quotations in 6th–7th century and even later works. These citations mainly refer to different herbs and other products, glass, pearls etc. some already known from other texts. The Nanfang caomuzhuang as one of the earliest collections on flora of Lingnan 嶺南 area was probably compiled at the turn of the 4th century, but more likely it was merely a forgery in the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279).²⁴ The work partly repeats earlier data but some new information can also be detected, such as descriptions of some herbs and perfumes.²⁵ Furthermore, there is an interesting allusion of a special kind of paper with honey fragrance, called mixiangzhi 蜜香紙. According to the passage, in the fifth year of Taikang 泰康五年, in 284, Daqin presented 30,000 rolls. As Yu (2013, 173) has pointed out, the Jin shu also provides information on an envoy sent by Daqin in 284/285, although the passage does not mention any products offered by them.²⁶

Although supernatural stories and legends, such as Shenyijing 神異經, Dongminji 洞冥記, Bowuzhi 博物志, Waiguotu 外國圖 and Xuanzhongji 玄中記 provide some considerably new details on Daqin, fiction and reality is broadly mixed in these works, so their reliability is quite dubious again. In this manner, the Shenyijing dated probably to the Western Han dynasty (202/206 BC–9 AD) or according to other opinions to the turn of the 2nd–3rd centuries AD (Li 李 1984, 151–158) combines geographical descriptions with legends. Although it does not mention Daqin and names the country of cranes beyond the Western Sea, according to some other texts the latter might be related to Daqin.²⁷

The Dongminji possibly written by Guo Xian 郭憲 from the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 AD) describes a tribute of flower-hoofed bull sent by Daqin people in the third year of Yuanfeng 元封三年, in 108 BC²⁸ According to many scholars such an early date is

²² More details on yiwuzhis in general: Yu 2013, 157–158.

²³ D. D. Lelsie and K. H. J. Gardiner list more: Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 84–85.

²⁴ To this problem: Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 88–89.

²⁵ Nanfang caomuzhuang juan shang 南方草木狀卷上.

²⁶ Jin shu juan jiushiqi liezhuan di liushiqisi yi zhuan 晉書:卷九十七列傳第六十七四夷傳 and Jin shu juan san diji di san wudi 晉書:卷三帝紀第三武帝.

²⁷ In Yu Taishan's opinion it refers to the Caspian or the Mediterranean Sea. 神異經十九 Shenyijing shijiu. Yu 2013, 183–184.

²⁸ Dongminji juan er 洞冥記卷二.

unacceptable since Daqin was unknown in the Middle Empire before the 1st century AD.²⁹ Moreover, besides the Dongminji there is no evidence of such early envoy in other sources, nor in archaeological data.³⁰

Similarly to the Dongminji, the Bowuzhi dated to the 3rd century also gives doubtful details on Daqin and combines Zhang Qian's 張騫 early mission in the 2nd century BC with later data provided by the standard histories (Yu 2013, 185).

Original of the Waiguotu, the description of foreign countries probably from the Jin dynasty (265–420) has been lost and only quotations exist in collections of the Tang period. These citations mainly describe Daqin people as being considerably tall with ape-like arms and long ribs.

The problem is similar in case of the Xuanzhongji dated between the 3rd–5th centuries. The original written by the Taoist philosopher Guo Pu 郭璞 was lost long ago and only collected versions can be found in Tang encyclopedias. Some details on Daqin plants are similar to the description given by the Nanzhou yiwuzhi, while new information on five colour glasses or glass-like materials of Daqin can also be found.

Augurial books or Hetus 河圖 have a contextual apparatus typically associated with the Chinese cosmology containing Confucian and Taoist philosophical thoughts and divinations. Only two of the nine Hetus dated to the Han dynasty (206/202 BC–220 AD) mention Daqin as a country located east of the Kunlun mountain where natives are irrationally tall (e.g. in the Hetu Yuban 河圖玉版 10 zhangs 丈 i.e. 231 meters³¹).

In poems, such as the Qibu fu 奇布賦 allusions of Daqin also appear. The work is generally accepted to be written by Yin Ju 殷巨 a minister of the Wu state (229–280) who later became an important official of the Jins (265–420). Unfortunately, only Tang sources, namely the Yiwen Leiju 藝文類聚 contains the whole poem which mentions another envoy by Daqin offering exotic items, such as fire proof cloth.³² According to the text, delegates from Daqin arrived in the second year of Taikang 泰康二年 in 281. At the same time, other records did not mention any tribute of Daqin people in 281. As Yu (2013, 170) has pointed out, the description of envoys from five states of eastern barbarians in the same year given by the Jin shu does not include Daqin.³³

Besides the above mentioned works, several Buddhist sutras dated between the 2nd century BC and the 10th century AD use the term Daqin. However, it is more likely that Daqin refers to a Hellenistic region of Bactria in these sources rather than the Roman Empire itself (Yu 2013, 203).

²⁹ E.g. Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 96; Yu 2013, 185. Although C. E. Ferguson's hypothesis on dating the first Sino-Roman contacts to the second half of 2nd century BC might be based on the Dongminji. Ferguson 1978, 592

³⁰ See Hoppál 2015, 49.

³¹ Based on Twitchett – Fairbank 2008, xxxviii.

³² The fire proof cloth supposed to be asbestos also appears among products of Daqin in standard histories. See among many Hoppál 2011, 295-296.

³³ See: Jin shu juan wuqi liezhuan di erqi luoxian tengxiu ma long hu fen tao huang wu yan zhang guang zhao yo 晉書卷五七 列傳第二七羅憲滕脩馬隆胡奮陶璜吾彥張光趙誘. Kodoses 2008; Yu 2013, 170. Nevertheless, D. D. Leslie and K. H. J. Gardiner suppose the date has to be corrected into 285, a year of a Daqin envoy mentioned by other works. Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 96.

Among texts providing Daqin accounts the Taoist scripture *Taiqing jinye shendanjing* 太清金液神丹經, The Grand Clarity Scripture of Golden Liquids and Divine Elixir can be considered as one of the most controversial pieces. Even its date is doubtful, since it could have been written during the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) as well as the Eastern Jin (317–420) or Liang dynasties (502–557). Furthermore, according to its translator, H. Maspero, the *Taiqing jinye shendanjing* used information from the 4th century but was compiled during the 7th century (Maspero 1950, 101).

In this work a new aspect of Daqin image can be found, an even more utopian one with several fictional elements. Some details can be compared with descriptions of standard histories, although the *Taiqing jinye shendanjing* mostly overdraws them. Such exaggeration for instance is the depiction of a righteous ruler who cultivates his fields himself, while his wife gathers mulberry leaves and weaves the material herself. Moreover, the country has no slaves and people live in harmony as a result of following the Dao since Daqin was converted by Laozi himself.³⁴

Perceptions of Daqin in 'Other texts'

To sum up problems in approaching 'Other works', the authenticity of Daqin accounts presented above is not only questionable because of subjective characteristics of these texts, but also because the originals were lost, and they are barely cited as stray and heterogenic fragments in various later works.

Nevertheless, they provide new aspects towards a multileveled Daqin picture, such as adding new items of curiosities to the products of Daqin, as did the *Waiguo zhuan*, the *Yiwuzhis* etc. Therefore, this remote country has been interpreted as a symbol of the provenance of exotics and hardly attainable rarities.³⁵ Furthermore, Daqin – especially in cases of Taoist scriptures and Buddhist sutras – appears as a nearly indefinable area with specific (Hellenistic) cultural characteristics/civilization(?) designating the region of Bactria in particular.

Several times reports provided by standard histories are repeated such as descriptions of the honest Daqin people in the *Sanqinji* or the impressive building decoration techniques given by the *Waiguo zhuan* and the *Guangzhi*. In the meantime, exaggeration also plays an important factor in these accounts. In the *Shenyijing* natives of Daqin live a hundred years and the *Taiqing jinye shendanjing* describes Daqin as a variation of 'heaven'.

Moreover, new data mostly related to *Fulin* 拂林 in later Tang sources can also be traced in some of these works. The *Funan yiwuzhi* – for instance – writes about a lamb which grows spontaneously in the earth similarly to *Fulin* accounts, such as in the *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書. At the same time, some of the new information on roads and envoys sent by Daqin might be regarded to be mere forgery, as we can suppose in case of the *Dongminji*.

³⁴ Originals and translations of the above cited works: Yu 2013, 129-140, 153-179, 183-214. For detailed analysis: Hoppál 2015, 35-55.

³⁵ From the 6th–7th centuries Persia bear the same function, as J. Wolters has pointed out. Wolters 1967, 43.

To sum up, Daqin is represented as a complex, multifaceted concept based on more subjective and fictional elements than the Roman image of the standard histories. Although, these abstract and hyperbolically idealistic factors can mostly be regarded as results of imagination, misunderstandings and intertextuality, they greatly reflect on writing conventions which partly or fully differ from the historical canon.³⁶

Some examples of texts with Daqin accounts referring to the 6th century onwards - the so called 'Later works'

Texts referring to events after the 6th century typically provide information partly or fully related to the Βασιλεία τῶν Ῥωμαίων. Although after the 6th century the term Fulin naming this rising power on the West became more popular, some works still used the expression Daqin. Therefore, it is more than problematic to distinguish details connected to the Roman Empire from information on the Byzantine Empire in these records.

Accordingly, Daqin accounts in works before the Tang dynasty (618–907), namely the Liang shu 梁書, history of the Liang dynasty (502–557) but particularly the Luoyang qielanji 洛陽伽藍記, The monasteries of Luoyang provide a larger amount of new information which might be considered as result of the increasing degree of cross-cultural communication from the 5th–6th centuries.

The Liang shu, another piece of the standard histories, is dated to the 7th century and refers to the period between 502 and 557 which is closer to the Βασιλεία τῶν Ῥωμαίων than the Roman Empire. Although the work partly summarizes earlier sources, unlike other historiographies it does not give a separate Daqin chapter but integrates these passages into the section of Tianzhu 天竺 i.e. India. Besides, the Liang shu also adds previously unknown details to its Daqin descriptions. Thus, it contains meticulous reports of some Daqin products, such as the process of making fragrant balm from suhe 蘇合.³⁷ Moreover, among information repeated in Tang period works, an allusion of an unknown communication with Daqin is recorded. According to the text in the fifth year of the Huangwu reign-period of Sun Quan 孫權黃武五年 in 226, a merchant from Daqin called Qin Lun 秦論 arrived to the court. He gave a detailed report on his country and later he was released with copious gifts.³⁸ Although there is no mention of Qin Lun or Daqin in other texts – except collections using data from the Liang shu – some details of circumstances on his arrival can be found in historical sources. At the same time, they give a different date for the envoy.³⁹

The Luoyang qielanji is accepted to be written by Yang Xuanzhi 楊銜之 in the 6th century and incorporates many seemingly more relevant information on Daqin along with some alteration of earlier sources. It says for instance that from the Congling 葱嶺 or Pamir

³⁶ For more details: Hoppál 2015, 58-60.

³⁷ Hoppál 2015, 32-33.

³⁸ Liang shu juan wuhisi liezhuan di sishiba zhuyi hainanzhuguo zhuan 梁書卷五十四列傳第四十八諸夷海南諸國傳. For English translation see e.g.: Yu 2013, 118-121.

³⁹ On this problem e.g.: Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 159. More details with further bibliography: Hoppál 2015, 31-34.

Mountains westwards to Daqin foreign traders and merchants came hurrying in through the passes every day to visit the city.⁴⁰

Works during and after the Tang dynasty – although still using the term Daqin – provide some more relevant information, more likely to be related to the Βασιλεία τῶν Ῥωμαίων combining them with reviews of earlier data (Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 107, 113). Therefore, the Daqin image provided by these works can only be indirectly connected to the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, through reinterpreting the earlier Daqin picture they give new aspects towards temporal and spatial perceptions of Daqin.⁴¹

For example, the Tongdian 通典 compiled by Du You 杜佑 in the 8th century can be regarded as one of the most detailed collection of knowledge on Daqin using all available data, historiographies and other texts as well. On the grounds that the Tongdian not only gathers information but also puts all data into a relatively systematic order. It also contains information that were unknown for previous texts, such as details on nations surrounding Daqin.⁴²

The bilingual, Chinese-Syriac limestone block called Nestorian Stele or Nestorian Monument was erected in 781. As the heading on the stone informs the Stele of the Transmission of the Brilliant Teaching 大秦景教流行中國碑 was originated in Daqin, and also adds a detailed but archaized description of this remote country. These passages not only serve as an outstanding document of early Chinese Christianity and Tang cosmopolitanism but also give further aspects towards the multileveled Daqin perceptions. Moreover the monument also reflects on changes of image of the Roman Empire in the Tang dynasty and gives a remarkable reflection on integration of foreign.⁴³

As a result, the incorporation of Nestorian Christianity into the complex, utopian and multileveled Daqin-tradition helps to understand local answers to the Non-Local.⁴⁴

Some thoughts on perceptions of Daqin in 'Later works'

Daqin in texts from the 6th century onwards – compared with earlier sources – is typically pictured as a combination of stereotypical topoi and some more relevant allusions. In some aspects, these records understand the Roman Empire as an abstract and archaic concept but also add new information reflecting to actualities rather connected to the Βασιλεία τῶν Ῥωμαίων.

Furthermore, in the Nestorian Stele new features are given to these complex Daqin perceptions, namely beyond the sphere of profane a religious element also appears.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Luoyang qielanji juan si 洛陽伽藍記 卷. For Chinese and English versions see: Yu 2013, 214-217. Analysis: Hoppál 2015, 60-61.

⁴¹ For more details see Hoppál 2015, 60-68.

⁴² Tongdian juan yijiusan bianfang dian xirong wu 通典卷一九三“邊防典·西戎五”. For Chinese and English texts see e.g. Yu 2013, 140-152. Analysis with further bibliography: Hoppál 2015, 61-63.

⁴³ Daqin jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei. Jing jiao liuxing zhongguo bei song bing xu. Daqin si seng jing jing shu 大秦景教流行中國碑. 景教流行中國碑頌並序. 大秦寺僧景淨述. Lieu 2009.

⁴⁴ A detailed analysis has been published with further bibliography in Hoppál 2014/2015.

⁴⁵ For more details see Hoppál 2015, 68-70.

Temporal and spatial patterns of perceptions

Although different aspects of Daqin appear in different types of works, the common point is that the Roman Empire is pictured by various clichés, classical allusions and stereotypical topoi⁴⁶

One of the most frequent clichés in historiographies, 'Other works' and 'Later sources' is the topos of location. These sources locate Daqin on the outer extremities, to a remote and unapproachable area which can be considered as the easternmost part of the known world. Routes on land and sea are also added in relatively detailed form, although identifications of place names given by these passages are still considered to be matters of debate.⁴⁷

Topos of moral superiority of rulers is also typical. In these accounts the king of Daqin appears as a righteous man who is chosen for his merits as e.g. the Hou Han shu states. Moreover, it also adds that when an unexpected calamity occurs in the country, such as the ordinary storms of wind and rain, the king is replaced by another, without feeling angry about this. This statement is varied in other texts such as the Wei lüe. Other alternatives of the virtuous ruler can also be discovered. For instance, in the Taiqing jinye shendanjing the king of Daqin cultivates his fields himself, while his wife waves a material from mulberry trees.

Moreover, moral superiority is also attributed to natives of Daqin as they being straightforward and living a peaceful life. In standard histories residents of Daqin are tall and virtuous, resemble the Chinese. In the Taiqing jinye shendanjing the locals are harmonious, there is no punishment, torture or evil people.

Mystical/magical attributes of Daqin can be considered as topos of transcendence. In the Wei lüe locals can use magic and according to the Shenyijing they live three hundred years, and they walk as though they were flying, going 1000 li in a day.⁴⁸

Topos of peculiarity is also a common feature of different works. In these accounts Daqin people are famous for their commercial activity and high-quality articles (e. g. multicoloured glass) as among many others the Wei lüe or the Xuanzhongji describe. Several kinds of various curiosities appear in 'Other texts' such as the Guangzhouji or in 'Later works' such as the Liang shu. Daqin is also pictured as symbol of exotics just like Bosi 波斯 i.e. Persia was similarly used in the 5th–7th centuries (Wolters 1967, 43).

These utopian features largely define the Chinese image of the Roman Empire.

By the same token, hints of sinocentrism also appear. In historiographical works it is stated that Daqin was the one who always wanted to make connections with the Middle Empire. Comparing the locals with Chinese is also typical. According to the Wei lüe or the Jin shu for example, the people of this state are tall and openhearted just like the Chinese, although they wear hu i.e. foreign clothes.

⁴⁶ Such as the nomads. Honey 1990, 168.

⁴⁷ See e.g.: Hoppál 2011, 271-275; Hoppál 2015, 186-190. For further bibliography: Kolb and Speidel 2015, 136-137.

⁴⁸ Translation from Yu 2013, 183.

On the other hand, relevant details can also be found in Chinese records. Traces of factuality can be detected when comparing the different Daqin products with the list of the various goods exported to India in the *Periplus*.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the relays and postal stations in e. g. the *Hou Han shu* could also be compared to the Roman *mutationes* and *mansiones*. Chinese *tings* 亭 were originally built only for official use but occasionally private travellers could also rent them for a certain amount of money. A similar system was in use in the Roman Empire where an *evectio* or a diploma was necessary to lease the stations, while the official use was free.⁵⁰

Despite the above similarities of Daqin picture, spatial patterns given by different work categories can also be traced.

Although Daqin perceptions given by historiographies are similar to accounts in 'Other works', subjectivity and forgery play a more significant role in the latter group. While historiographical works aim to turn towards an objective reality, 'Other works' show more flexibility in their descriptions. Partly because of these characteristics, new elements – factual or fictional also appear. However, new details on Daqin products might be a result that Daqin was considered as general symbol of exotics in these works.

Intertextuality plays a significant role in Daqin accounts, although these repeated and varied passages in many aspects are more exaggerated and mystified. Moreover, Daqin in these non-official works is often understood in a much broader sense than meaning the Roman Empire itself. It also refers to a Hellenistic cultural characteristics/civilization(?) designating the region of Bactria in particular.

In 'Later works' the picture of Daqin is greatly archaised based on revised and reinterpreted or merely copied versions of earlier accounts. In these texts a collection of factual and fictional knowledge on the Roman Empire is combined with some more actual allusions partly or fully connected to the *Βασιλεία τῶν Ῥωμαίων*. Furthermore, in Christian documents beyond the sphere of profane a religious element is also added to the complex Daqin concept.

Roman-related archaeological finds in China

A short overview

Since detailed analyses of Roman and Roman influenced objects have been published recently by the author,⁵¹ only a short review of the most important characteristics will be presented below.

Among the archaeological finds, transparent glass vessels are considered to be the most remarkable group. Besides the significant number of glass discoveries, in some cases chemical analyses are also available, which might help to identify the origin of these

⁴⁹ *Periplus* 49. Also see: Hoppál 2011, 297-298.

⁵⁰ For further bibliography: Hoppál 2011, 282. As A. Kolb has pointed out 'distances of 10 li (4.2 km) between postal stages and thirty li (12.5 km) between the larger postal stations are not confirmed by Roman sources'. See: Kolb 2000, 212-213 or Kolb and Speidel 2015, 140. At the same time, it is important to take into account that 'in certain contexts the term li is used rhetorically rather than as a precise indication of distance.' See e.g.: Twitchett – Fairbank 2008, xxxviii.

⁵¹ Hoppál 2015, 70-184; 2016.

objects. However, in several cases, the contexts of these items are poorly documented or corrupted in some ways.

At the same time, it is also significant that western-imported glass objects were discovered in a remarkable number in the eastern coastal part of the People's Republic of China. They were unearthed in burials of the most prestigious and well-defined stratum of Chinese aristocracy and were also highly treasured because of their transparency, rarity and mysterious characteristics. Considering the role of Roman-related objects in Chinese society, despite their concrete price and rarity, they might have been described from ritual and symbolic aspects as well, which resulted in value beyond the material sphere.⁵²

Roman and Roman-influenced finds (glass objects, textiles etc.) discovered in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region regarding the cultural–ethnic diversity of the area have to be considered as a separate group. Presumably none of these items associated with such complex/varied traditions were directly connected to the Roman Empire (except transparent glass vessels that underwent chemical composition analyses). However, typical characteristics of Hellenistic/Roman art can be clearly detected. In this manner, these Roman-related objects play an indirect role in affecting perceptions of the Roman Empire. These items might also help us gain a deeper understanding of the various and complex artistic/cultural models of the Silk Road.

Concerning Roman-like metalwares, a similar pattern – taking problems of their insignificant number into consideration (only two items for the whole research period) – can be outlined.⁵³

Ways and temporal patterns of communications

Through a careful approach of existing materials provided by written records and archaeological data it is possible to draw some conclusions on probable ways⁵⁴ and temporal patterns of information flow.

Standard histories typically differentiate a land route used by Gan Ying's mission in 97 AD from the waterway travelled by Andun's 安敦 delegacy sent by Daqin in 166 AD.⁵⁵ The Hou Han shu also adds that the western coast of Tianzhu (i. e. India) communicated with Daqin and the precious things from Daqin can be found there.⁵⁶ The 1st century Greek travel book, the Periplus Maris Erythraei, seemingly confirms the above statement. It not only describes the trade between the Roman Empire and India but also adds information on foreign relations with India.⁵⁷

⁵² See in: Hoppál 2016.

⁵³ For a detailed analysis and further bibliography see: Hoppál 2015, 73-184.

⁵⁴ Since several great publications on different routes have been published, only a short summary will be given here. See e.g.: Liu 2010; McLaughlin 2010; Hansen 2012; Seland 2015.

⁵⁵ On these envoys and other embassies recorded in standard histories: Hoppál 2011, 299-302. See also: Kolb and Speidel 2015, 134.

⁵⁶ See Hoppál 2011, 302.

⁵⁷ Periplus 64. Translation see: Casson 1989, 22. Although it is problematic to give an exact interpretation, but it is widely accepted that the name Thinae in this text refers to the Middle Empire. See e.g. McLaughlin

The earliest certainly Roman finds, namely glass vessels from Shuangshan 双山 and Laohudun 老虎墩 in the Ganquan 甘泉 region of Nanjing province, dated to the 1st century⁵⁸ also suggest maritime route(s).⁵⁹ Furthermore, the date of tombs where these objects were discovered fits together with the first dated information on Daqin given by standard histories.

From the 3rd century many new but somewhat mystified details appeared about Daqin, especially in non-official texts. An increase of information can also be recognized in the concentration of Roman objects in the Nanjing region during the 4th and early 5th centuries.⁶⁰ In this period a synchronous use of land and maritime ways could be suggested, and a combination of routes might also be common.⁶¹ At the same time, the location of Roman-related objects dated to the late 5th century suggests a preference for the land route.⁶²

Then in the 6th–7th centuries (both in written records and archaeological data) a change of quality and quantity of information can be traced as a result of increasing information between China and the West. However, these new, more factual details actually refer to the emerging Βασιλεία τῶν Ῥωμαίων.⁶³

Reception of the Roman Empire in China between the 1st – 5th centuries

Many great works have been published on the Chinese image of the Roman Empire, but few take into account the different characteristics of texts along with the significance of archaeological finds. Although none of these circumstances would change the general picture of the Romans, through a series of temporal and spatial patterns of perceptions, they add more details towards the reception of the Imperium.

To sum up the perceptions in Daqin accounts provided by different text categories, the image of the Roman Empire in Chinese records referring to the period before the 5th century, is represented by stereotypical filters of second-hand information and irrelevant

2010, 59. With further bibliography: Hoppál 2015, 207-213 etc. For a comprehensive approach of Chinese records on sea routes see: Chan 陳 2003.

⁵⁸ According to the chemical composition analyses, these finds are considered to be unquestionably Roman objects. See in detail: Hoppál 2016, 100-101. X. Zhaoming cites two other glasses as being 'Roman', but according to the excavation report, in case of tomb no. 5 discovered in Jiuzhiling 九只岭 no chemical composition analysis has been made. Moreover, in the excavation report only a short description of glass, chrystal and amber beads can be found. See: Guangxi zhuangzu zizhiqu wenwu gongzuodui 广西壮族自治区文物工作队 and Hepu xian bowuguan 合浦县博物馆 2003, 74; In Liaowei 寮尾 – site also cited by X. Zhaoming – five out of eleven glass objects were interpreted as soda-lime glasses, but their chemical compositions provided by the excavation report somewhat differ from compositions of typical Roman originated glasses. Therefore, identifying provenance of these vessels still requires further research. Guangxi wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 广西文物考古研究所 and Hepuxian bowuguan 合浦县博物馆 and Guangxi shifan daxue wenlü xueyuan 广西师范大学文旅学院 2012, 538-539; Zhaoming 2014, 1234.

⁵⁹ However, it is not clear how far into the Indian Ocean maritime links of the Han dynasty went. See: Sen 2016, 538.

⁶⁰ Roman glass vessels were discovered in tombs of Eastern Jin emperors and their officials. See: Hoppál 2016, 102-105.

⁶¹ This period shows more engagement between the coastal areas of China and the maritime world. See: Sen 2016, 542. See also: Zhaoming 2014.

⁶² See: Hoppál 2015, 189.

⁶³ With further bibliography: Hoppál 2015, 269-273.

data along with moral, ideological and intellectual standards of the age. At the same time, despite such irrelevant and mystified elements, Daqin appears as an actual state with existing cultural, political and economical power which had commercial potential as well – although it was less significant and indirect in relation to the Middle Empire.

In spite of problems of sporadicity and poor documentation of archaeological data, the above visualisations are still confirmed by Roman and Roman related glass vessels, Roman-influenced textiles and metalwares discovered in different sites from the Eastern coastal part of China to the Xinjiang region. Nevertheless, these finds also reflect various levels of adoption and adaptation of what we call Roman.

According to the documentary and material sources, the Roman Empire was understood as a distant and therefore mystical country, thus *major ex longinquo reverentia*.⁶⁴ Its products were moved by a series of middlemen as a long-term (in some cases hundreds of years) action, which resulted in an increase in material value of these exotic objects. The country was also attributed with mystical features as it was interpreted as the manufacturer of goods often connected to ritual practice in Chinese society, which raised the immaterial value of its products.

Moreover, this complex picture was complemented with a special aspect outlined by descriptions of Buddhist sutras and textiles from the desert region of Xinjiang, metalwork, figurative and visual artworks: in these cases, it was understood as a nearly indefinable area with specific (Hellenistic) cultural characteristics/civilization(?) designating the region of Bactria in particular.

In consequence, in the 1st to 5th centuries the Roman Empire was received as an unknown and utopian but real country, which changed into a more factual interpretation gradually related to the emerging Βασιλεία τῶν Ῥωμαίων during the turbulent period of the 5th- 6th centuries.

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⁶⁴ For more details on topoi of *major ex longinquo reverentia* see: Bertuccioli 1997.

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