

From East to West

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In researching Southeast Asia in the SCA period for a previous *Cockatrice* article (se leof, 2016), I read numerous accounts of European travellers, colonists and missionaries who travelled into the east. But what about people moving in the opposite direction? Did anyone from Asia come to Europe during the SCA period and, if they did, what did they think of what they saw?

Of course Europe is attached to the western part of Asia, and there has been traffic between the two for all of recorded history. People familiar with European history would know that Alexander the Great conquered lands from Greece to India, and both the Roman Empire and the Crusaders occupied territory in what we now call the Middle East. From the other direction, the Mongol and Ottoman Empires occupied parts of eastern Europe over the thirteenth to fifteen centuries. But in keeping with my previous article, I'd like to focus on travellers from the east of India.

China and Rome

Europe and Asia have been connected economically since ancient times through the series of trade routes now known as the Silk Road. Goods could travel from East Asia through Central Asia to Europe, and vice versa, through a series of exchanges between merchants, but very few people made the entire journey themselves. There were certainly no Greek or Roman colonies in China, or Chinese colonies in Europe, of the sort I wrote about in my previous article.

Roman geographers were aware that there was some land in the east – inhabited by people known as the “Seres” – from which silk and other goods originated, but they had only the vaguest idea of where it was or what it might be like. Strabo, writing in the first century BC, records doubtful tales of the Seres living for up to two hundred years. Pliny, writing in first century AD, reports them to have yellow hair and blue eyes, and that silk is obtained by soaking the leaves of certain trees in water.

The situation appears to have been much the same at the Chinese end. The Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD) had relations with Parthia, in what is now Iran, and was aware that there was another empire further to west, called *Lijian* or *Da Qin* (“Great China”). What they knew of it is recorded in a chapter known as *The Peoples of the West*, written by Yu Huan in the third century AD, and a history known as the *The History [or Book] of the Later Han*, compiled by Fan Ye in the fifth century.

Yu Huan’s information seems to be correct when it states that *Da Qin* extended for thousands of kilometres and contained hundreds of towns, but more questionable when it reports that its rulers were replaced whenever disastrous “unusual phenomena” occurred, and downright baffling when the inhabitants of *Da Qin* are said to make cloth from “the down of water-sheep”.

The History of the Later Han records that Ban Chao, governor of the western regions of the Han empire in the first century AD, sent an assistant by the name of Gan Ying on a mission to contact *Da Qin* in 97 AD. Gan Ying eventually arrived in a place called *Tiaozhi*, on the edge of a sea that Parthian sailors told him would take three months to cross with favourable winds, or two years otherwise. This information prompted Gan Ying to turn back.

Most historians, including McLaughlin (2016) and Liu & Shaffer (2007), think that *Tiaozhi* lay on the Persian Gulf, and that the three-month-or-longer journey was a garbled and/or exaggerated account of how to reach Rome itself by sailing from the gulf. McLaughlin observes that Gan Ying could in fact have reached the eastern border of the Roman Empire in about forty days by travelling overland to

Syria, had he known to do so. A few others, such as Zhang (2005), speculate that the sea involved might have been the Mediterranean, which might make Gan Ying's sailor's estimate more reasonable. But Liu & Shaffer argue that this cannot be, since Gan Ying's Tiaozhi was controlled by Parthians, while the Mediterranean was controlled by Romans at this time.

The subsequent Wu Dynasty (220 – 280 AD) had another opportunity to reach Rome in the third century AD, when a document known as the *Liang-shu* tells us that a Roman merchant called Lun arrived in southern China. The Wu emperor sent one Liu Xian on a return journey with Lun, along with twenty "blackish coloured dwarfs" who had been captured by some Chinese and who Lun thought would make a novelty in Rome. No record exists of Lun, Liu Xian or any dwarfs having reached the Roman Empire, however, and the *Liang-shu* supposes that Liu Xian must have died on the journey.

This seems to have been the end of Chinese adventures into the far west, until the voyages of Zheng He in the fifteen century. Zheng He visited Arabia and East Africa in several voyages over 1405-1431, before dying in India in 1433. But the Ming Dynasty turned against international exploration in 1430, withdrawing from Southeast Asia, and (we now know) leaving the seas to be dominated by European powers over the following centuries.

The Mongol Empire

In between the times of the Han and Wu Dynasties and those of the Ming Dynasty, came the Mongol Empire. Genghis Khan famously conquered territory all the way from Korea to the Ukraine in the early thirteenth century. After his death in 1227 AD, the empire was divided into four khanates, of which the Golden Horde is of most interest to this article.

The Golden Horde occupied the northwestern part of the Mongol Empire, covering the Caucasus, the Ukraine, and parts of Russia. Over 1237-1242, armies led by Genghis Khan's grandson, Batu, and one of Genghis Khan's generals, Subedei, ventured deeper into eastern Europe, sacking cities in what is now Hungary and Poland; a recent book by Frank McLynn (2015) gives a detailed account. The campaign reached as far west as Vienna, but here the Mongols turned back. It is often supposed that this was due to the death of the Great Khan, Ogedei, in 1241, but no one is really sure and historians have suggested a number of other explanations that you can find in McLynn's book.

A few decades later, Marco Polo and his brother arrived at the court of Kublai Khan in Mongolia itself. According to Chapter 7 of Marco's *Travels*, the Khan asked the brothers to bring a letter to the Pope, accompanied by a Mongol baron known as Cogatal. What happened to Cogatal, however, is unknown.

The Golden Horde continued to exist in various forms for the next few centuries, but never again came so far into Europe. The Horde itself was eventually absorbed by the Ottoman Empire in the late fifteenth century.

Southeast Asia

Arabs seem to have been travelling to southeast Asia within the first few centuries after the Prophet Mohammed (Lockard 2009). After much of the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and Java converted to Islam over the course of the fourteenth and fifteen centuries, at least a few southeast Asians travelled back to Islamic centres in the Middle East. The most famous of these is Hamzah Fansuri, a Sumatran poet who lived in Baghdad in the late sixteenth century or early seventeenth century, but I couldn't find any stories of anyone making the extra step to Europe.

Evidently at least one southeast Asian was brought back to Europe, however, because contemporary accounts of Ferdinand Magellan's circumnavigation of the Earth refer to Magellan bringing with him a slave that he had earlier acquired in Melaka. Maximilianus Transylvanus says that the slave was originally from Maluku, and both Transylvanus and Antonio Pigafetta have him acting as an interpreter once the voyage reached the Philippines. In later writing, the slave came to be known as "Enrique", the Spanish version of the name given to him by Pigafetta. What Enrique did whilst in Europe awaiting Magellan's famous voyage, or thought about being there, is not recorded.

Some speculate that Enrique might have been the first person to travel all the way around the globe, albeit without having had much say in the matter. Magellan himself was killed in the Philippines, and Enrique would have completed the circuit upon arriving in Melaka (or Maluku, if Transylvanus is correct) while the rest of Magellan's crew had to return to Europe to complete the journey. While Pigafetta says that Enrique survived the massacre that did for many Magellan's crew in the Philippines, no more is said of him and so we do not know if or when he ever made it back to his point of origin.

Conclusion

Stories of Asians travelling to Europe during the SCA period seem to be somewhat rarer than those of Europeans travelling to Asia, and several of the Asians who tried are reported to have met bad (or at least mysterious) ends. None of them seem to have left us with details comparable to those that survive from Marco Polo, or Ibn Battuta, or Tomé Pires. It's possible that this is a bias introduced by my perspective as a Westerner looking eastwards, and by reading mostly histories written by other Westerners (though I also searched several modern histories translated from Chinese, such as Zhang's and Li's). But I hope this little history gives some idea of what the SCA's world might have looked like from the far east nonetheless.

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Translations of relevant sections of *The History of the Later Han* can be found in the modern histories cited above.