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## HELLENISTIC WORLD AND THE SILK ROAD<sup>1</sup>

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It is well known that Zhang Qian played an important role in the opening of the Silk Road during the reign of the Han Emperor Wudi (汉武帝, 141–87 B.C.). However, his immediate aim in visiting the remote Western Regions had not been to open the door for the silk trade, but to make contact with the tribes of the Yuezhi (月氏) in order to mount a joint attack on their common enemy, the Xiongnu tribes, because Wudi had the ambition to expand his rule westwards and thus to create a world empire. This mirrors to some extent the conquests of Alexander the Great, who had set out not to obtain precious silk from the fabled land of the Seres, but to conquer the Persian Empire and then the rest of the inhabited world. The effects of great enterprises, however, are often very different from what had been intended initially. The control of the Western Regions by the Han Empire in fact did not last long, and in the following centuries the roads to the west were sometimes open and sometimes closed. For its part, the empire of Alexander collapsed within a few years after his death, and the Hellenistic kingdoms established by his generals gradually declined and disappeared before the end of first century B.C. It was the Silk Road, as a witness, so to speak, of historical change that remained open for centuries, enabling cultural interaction and the exchange of goods between East and West. Many scholars in China and abroad have focused their attention on the role of Zhang Qian in the opening of the Silk Road, whereas almost no one has noticed the connection between his

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mission and the conquests of Alexander the Great. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the Silk Road from its other end, the Mediterranean, and to investigate how the conquests of the Greeks and Macedonians eastwards stimulated the opening, extension, and continuation of the Silk Road, and how elements of Hellenistic culture were eventually brought to China.

### **Contacts and Rumors: Connections between East and West prior to Alexander the Great's Conquests**

Before the conquests of Alexander there were some economic and cultural contacts between the main civilizations of the ancient world. In Greece in the late fifth or early fourth century B.C., rumors appeared about a far-away people called the Seres.<sup>2</sup> Although there was no certainty about its location, many ancient authors came to believe that Seres, the silk-producing country, was somewhere in the east.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it perhaps became the name for China in western accounts. The Greek historian Herodotus (4.13–14.16) mentions a brave Greek traveler, Aristes, who is said to have traveled through the land of the Scythians all the way to the country of the Issedones. According to some scholars, the country of the Issedones should be roughly located in the areas from the Ural Mountains eastwards to the region between the Tianshan and Altai Mountains, and even as far as Loulan and Dunhuang.<sup>4</sup> In the last century, pieces of silk were discovered in a Celtic tomb of the sixth century B.C. in Germany,<sup>5</sup> while well-preserved examples of Chinese embroidery depicting images of Phoenixes together with bronze mirrors with the Chinese character 卍 on their backs were unearthed at the tombs of Pazyryk in the Altai mountains dated between the c. fifth and third century B.C.<sup>6</sup> The fact that goods made in ancient central China were discovered by archaeologists in western Europe is an indication of the existence of a Eurasian Grassland Road in ancient times. It was the Scythians and other nomads moving between the Black Sea and the Aral Sea who made this

<sup>2</sup> The name of the Seres is first mentioned by the Greek physician and historian Ctesias (5<sup>th</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.). He once served at the Persian court, where he probably heard of the “Seres.” The veracity of his information has been doubted by western scholars such as H. Yule and G. Coedès, and the Chinese scholar Zhang Xinglang. H. Yule especially pointed out that the name appears only in the *Bibliotheca* of Photius. The Greek word *Seres* was not known prior to Ctesias’ era. See Yule 1915, 14 with n. 2; Zhang 1977, 17; Coedès 1987, 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Yule 1915, 14–15; Coedès 1987, 1–54, 71–72.

<sup>4</sup> See Sun 1985, 3–25; Pédech 1983, 22; Wang 1986, 53 with n. 1; Hudson 1931, 37 and 39; Ma, Wang 1990, 1–16.

<sup>5</sup> Biel 1980, 429–438.

<sup>6</sup> Rudenko 1957, 7–48.

belt of continuous grassland into an east-west route. But the Eurasian Grassland Road was not well defined, since the nomads who made it possible annually migrated from one place to another. Therefore, this route was not and never became the main channel of communications between East and West.

In the sixth century B.C. the Persian Empire developed direct contacts with the Ionian Greeks of Asia Minor. Some, like Herodotus (c. 484–425 B.C.), visited Babylon, while others served at the court of Persia, like Ctesias (end of 5th century B.C.) in his role of royal physician, or Scylax (end of 6th century B.C.), who navigated the Indus River and circumnavigated Arabia around 510 B.C. (Hdt. 4.44). There were even Greeks who voluntarily migrated to Bactria and Sogdiana,<sup>7</sup> apart from those whom the Persians forced to do so.<sup>8</sup>

The domain of the Persian Empire was vast and stretched from India in the east to Europe and Egypt in the west. To consolidate his control, Darius I built a system of imperial roads of which the most famous was the Royal Road in the western part of the Empire. Starting at Susa, one of the capitals of the empire, and passing through Mesopotamia, it ended at Sardis. The road was over 2,000 kilometers long with numerous post houses (22 of which have been verified). Another important road led east along the track of the ancient Mesopotamian-Median road, and then further through Bactria to India.<sup>9</sup> It was by this road that the precious lapis lazuli of the eastern mountains in Bactria was transported to Mesopotamia and India.<sup>10</sup> The evidence that Greek coins might have been circulating in Bactria before the conquest of Alexander suggests the possibility of long-distance trade between the eastern Mediterranean and the Hindu Kush Mountains already in the classical period.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the road linking Central Asia to India later became the western part of the Silk Road. Darius I also dredged the canal joining the Nile with the Red Sea, which had not been finished by the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho of the 26<sup>th</sup> dynasty. Thus, roads and waterways were used to strengthen the connec-

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<sup>7</sup> One such example is the Branchidae, mentioned by Strabo (11.11.4). Having betrayed their homeland, they voluntarily followed Xerxes back to Persia, and were later settled in Sogdiana by the king.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see the Barcaeans mentioned by Herodotus (4.204). As Greek colonists in Libya, they had been enslaved and removed from Egypt by the Persian army. Later, Darius I forced them to migrate to Bactria. In Herodotus' time, their descendants still remained there, apparently by their own free will. For the sources of these early Greek immigrants in the Central Asia, see Holt 1989, 55, n. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Wiesehöfer 1996, 6–77.

<sup>10</sup> Holt 1989, 28.

<sup>11</sup> In Afghanistan, a farmer discovered a pot full of encrusted coins in 1966 that turned out to be mostly Athenian tetradrachms of the classical period. The total amount of the coins could never be ascertained, but at least 150 were seen. They must have circulated in Bactria as bullion before the time of Alexander's invasion. A similar hoard was found on the east side of Kabul in 1933. It may have included a thousand coins of Greek city-states. See Holt 2005, 141.

tions between the different regions of the Persian Empire and beyond before the conquests of Alexander the Great in (334–330 B.C.).<sup>12</sup>

There were other states in Eurasia in the fourth century B.C., but these remained primarily regional in scope and thus did not participate in long distance trade either because they were geographically isolated or because they were relatively underdeveloped. The Romans, for example, were at this time advancing southward to unify Italy, and while they may have known from the Greeks of southern Italy about the eastern dominions of the Persian kingdom, they were too preoccupied with uniting the Italian peninsula to have any regard for them. At the same time, India was marked by a series of regional states and kingdoms (sixth-fourth centuries B.C.). Thus the kingdom of Magadha which in time would come to dominate much of northern India was a small power that only occupied areas along the Ganges, while Buddhism had yet to flourish in the western parts of the subcontinent. But the northwestern fringe of India under Persian rule did enjoy contact, albeit to a limited extent, with the outside world. Finally, China was in the midst of the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.) with seven of the stronger states contending for hegemony with no thought given to any westward expansion.

To sum up, by the fourth century B.C. some civilizations in western Eurasia had limited contact with each other, but no regular links or channels connecting the two ends of Eurasia as of yet formally existed. The Chinese vision of the western world did not go beyond what was described in the *Chinese Bestiary* (*Records of Mountains and Seas*, or *Shanhai Jing*, [山海经]) and the *Biography of King Mu* (*Mutianzi zhuan*, [穆天子传]).<sup>13</sup> While the Greeks were well aware of Egypt and Babylon, they remained painfully ignorant of India and quite possibly unaware of China, depending on what was understood by the term Seres. Alexander imagined that beyond India there was the Great Ocean where the East ended, but had no idea that there were large stretches of land, for instance, beyond the River Jaxartes (Syr Darya). On the whole, Alexander's knowledge of the eastern world did not differ markedly from Herodotus (4.40).

### East-West Communication and the Hellenistic Far East

Alexander as the head of a Macedonian-Greek army started his conquest of the Persian Empire in 334 B.C. Ten years later he not only ruled the king-

<sup>12</sup> The Persian army invading Greece under king Xerxes (486–465) in 480–479 B.C. came from numerous satrapies in the Empire, and some of the contingents even from as far as Bactria and India. This underlines the important role of the Royal Roads.

<sup>13</sup> These two books were written at least before Qin Dynasty (221–206 B.C.) by anonymous authors. Both describe some myths and legends about the world the Chinese then knew and imagined. The western limit of the world was largely confined to today's Xinjiang.

dom, but had enlarged it. Although Alexander's empire fell apart after his sudden death in 323 B.C. and was carved up by his successors, the pattern of Macedonian-Greek rule over local populations did not change. Although Greek culture was ubiquitous throughout the Hellenistic world, the Greeks did not live in a vacuum as fusion between Greek and eastern cultures became increasingly manifest. The Hellenistic world facilitated communication between the various Hellenistic kingdoms and their non-Greek neighbors. As a result, new systems of communication and trade routes arose between the Mediterranean and India.

There were three main trade routes between East and West. A northern route linked India and Bactria to the Black Sea. Goods were transported from India via Bactria, then down the Oxus, across the Caspian, and from there to the Black Sea.<sup>14</sup> A middle route connecting India and Asia Minor took two tracks: one started in western India and extended through the Persian Gulf by sea and the Tigris River to Seleucia on the Tigris; another was a land route that began in India and made its way across the Hindu Kush to Seleucia on the Tigris. From there the road continued westwards across the Syrian desert to Antioch on the Orontes and ultimately the Asia Minor coast. This route appears in the *Parthian Stations* by the geographer Isidore of Charax in the first century B.C. which describes the route by land from Antioch to India through the Parthian kingdom.<sup>15</sup> A southern route linked India and Egypt through the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.<sup>16</sup> Here, Ptolemy II dredged a canal through the desert connecting the Red Sea with the Nile so that Indian goods could be transported to Alexandria. The discovery of the monsoon in the Indian Ocean in the first century B.C. made the sea route safer and more convenient.<sup>17</sup> These three routes more or less coincide with the later western section of the Silk Road. There was only one portion, namely the route from the Hexi Corridor to the Pamirs that was not linked with the routes in Central Asia at this time.

According to Strabo (11.11.1), the Greek ruler of Bactria, Euthydemus I, and his son Demetrius I in the second century B.C. "extended their empire even as

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<sup>14</sup> Some scholars, especially Tarn doubted the real existence of this route (Tarn 1952, 241). But I agree with Professor Jeffrey D. Lerner that it is through this route that goods were transported by boats that sailed from the Mediterranean and Black Sea to Central Asia (Lerner 2012b). On the movement of goods from Central Asia and India to the Black Sea, see Rtveldadze 2011, 149–178.

<sup>15</sup> See Schoff 1914.

<sup>16</sup> On the three routes, see Tarn 1952, 241–5; Walbank 1981, 199–200; Olbrycht 2013, 67–87. Cf. Strab. 2.1.11, 15; 11.7.3; Plin. *NH* 6.52. On the northern route, Strabo's narrative is the clearest and most detailed, but W. W. Tarn firmly denied its existence. I prefer the opinions of the ancient authors. However, it should be noted that some of them believed that the Oxus river flowed into the Caspian Sea. But in fact it bifurcated and flowed into the Caspian and the Aral Sea in antiquity, see Lerner 2012b.

<sup>17</sup> See Walbank 1981, 200–204; Schoff 1912.

far as the Seres and the Phryni.” At that time, the land of the Seres was still regarded by the peoples of the west as the region, however vague and hazy, where silk was produced, and not as imperial China of the Han Dynasty. Some scholars have identified the Phryni as the Xiongnu nomads,<sup>18</sup> but the influence of the Xiongnu had not yet reached the areas bordering on Bactria.<sup>19</sup> The eastern borders of the kingdom of Euthydemus and Demetrius must have been the Pamirs and the Tarim Basin. A. K. Narain reasonably accepted the suggestion of A. Cunningham and identified the Seres and the Phryni as Sule (Kashgar, 疏勒) and Puli (蒲犁), respectively,<sup>20</sup> both of which are referred to in Chinese records of the Western Regions of Han Dynasty, because their locations precisely coincide with the districts of Kashgar (喀什) and Tashkurgan on the eastern side of the Pamirs in today’s Xinjiang Province of China.

Thus before Zhang Qian arrived in Central Asia in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., the western section (*i.e.*, the region west of the Pamirs) of the Silk Road was already in use. By then, the political and cultural circumstances in the Hellenistic Far East had changed considerably in the two centuries that had passed since the conquests of Alexander the Great.

The Asian portion of Alexander the Great’s Empire was almost entirely inherited by Seleucus I (c. 312–280 B.C.). However, because of the rise of the Maurya Empire, Seleucus I failed to retake control of northwest of India and was compelled to sign a treaty with Chandragupta Maurya in 305 B.C.<sup>21</sup> Around the middle of the third century, Diodotus I, the Greek governor of the satrapy of Bactria, declared his independence from the Seleucid kingdom. At about the same time, the Parthians (later referred to by Zhang Qian as “Anxi”) likewise revolted from the Seleucids and established their own kingdom. The Seleucids were unable to retain their eastern satrapies and the core of the Seleucid kingdom shifted to the region between the Euphrates and the eastern coast of the Mediterranean with Antioch in Syria as its administrative center. In the second century B.C. Euthydemus and his son Demetrius, the kings of Bactria, extended their sway south of the Hindu Kush into northwestern India. Half

<sup>18</sup> Hudson 1931, 58

<sup>19</sup> According to ‘The Collective Biographies of Dayuan’ in *Shiji*, the Xiongnu defeated the formerly so-called Dayuezhi. But until the fourth year of Qianyuan of the Han emperor Wendi (汉文帝, 176 B.C.) the Xiongnu had not conquered and driven out the Dayuezhi and submitted Loulan, Wusun, Hujie, and 26 other neighboring countries. Therefore, before 176 B.C. the Greeks of Bactria were not in a position to attack the Xiongnu.

<sup>20</sup> See Narain 1957, 170–171. For the introduction of these two places see Ban 1962, 3898, 3919.

<sup>21</sup> Seleucus I gave up his dominion in the northwest of India in exchange for the right of intermarrying and the ‘gift’ of five hundred elephants from the Indian king Sandrocottus (Chandragupta); see Strab. 15.2.9.

a century later, the Greek Bactrians were forced to retreat to India under pressure from the Parthians from the west,<sup>22</sup> and the Sacas and Dayuezhi from Central Asia.<sup>23</sup> When Zhang Qian arrived in Bactria in c. 129–128 B.C., the country had been conquered by the Dayuezhi, which he called Daxia (大夏).

Thus far these events occurred before Zhang Qian's arrival in Bactria. Although the territories directly controlled by the Greeks had been greatly reduced in size, Hellenistic culture was still very much in evidence. For example, it has been estimated that the full catalogue of colonies (cities and settlements) founded in Asia by Alexander and his successors "would no doubt comprise well over 300 names." Some 275 names of these colonies have been confirmed. Most of them (some 160) were located in areas along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean; others were in the middle and lower reaches of the Euphrates as well as in areas east of it. There were nineteen Greek settlements in Bactria (of which eight were foundations of Alexander the Great<sup>24</sup>) and twenty-seven in India.<sup>25</sup> The existence of Greek colonization in Bactria was confirmed by the discovery of the site of Ai Khanoum in Afghanistan in 1964.<sup>26</sup> These cities and settlements, built along popular routes or next to military forts, were a significant element in the organization of Graeco-Macedonian rule. They might have had Greek-style temples, gymnasia, and theatres like those found at Ai Khanoum. Most of the city's residents were probably Greek. Not surprisingly then, the cities enjoyed an atmosphere of Greek culture. One can well image that the Greek language, coins, gods, plays, and customs must have made the Greeks in these far-away lands feel at home. On the other hand, in relation to the vast extension of land, these cities were little more than cultural oases in a 'barbarian' desert. The Greeks strove to maintain the purity and unity of their culture and even tried to influence the local peoples, while also having to deal

<sup>22</sup> Parthia seized a part of Bactria during the reigns of Eucratides I (c. 171 – 145 B.C.) and his successors (Strab. 11.9.2; 11.11.2).

<sup>23</sup> According to Strabo (11.8.2), the nomads who took away Bactriana from the Greeks are the Asii Pasiani, Tochari, and Sacarauli. Among them the Tochari were possibly the Dayuezhi and Sacarauli were the Sai People mentioned in Chinese historical documents.

<sup>24</sup> Strab. 11.11.4. But according to Fraser (1996, 201), Alexander was only the actual founder of six cities named Alexandria among which four were in Central Asia and India. This number is significantly smaller than those given by the classical authors and other modern scholars; see Austin 1999, 167–168; Olbrycht 2014, 95–121.

<sup>25</sup> Cary 1959, 244–245. For the cities founded by the Seleucid dynasty see also App. 11.57; Sherwin-White, Kuhrt 1993, 20–21; Cohen 1978, 2, 14–19 and his "Map of Hellenistic Asia".

<sup>26</sup> On the Hellenistic features of the site, Paul Bernard has published three papers on Ai Khanoum: Bernard 1982, 148–159; 1967, 71–95; 1994, 117–23. There is also some useful information on the site in Dani, Bernard 1994, 92–95. The formal excavation was greatly disturbed by the wars since 1979, but some Hellenistic works of art, such as the statues of Heracles and Athena, have been unearthed; see Holt 2005, 162–3; Yang 2007, 96–105.

with the influences of eastern culture, living as they did in a ‘boundless sea’ of indigenous and local cultures. Hellenistic culture thus gradually acquired the character of a mixture of Greek and eastern elements.

According to Strabo, when Alexander arrived in Bactria and Sogdiana he found that the inhabitants practiced customs similar to those of nomads.<sup>27</sup> But during the period of Greek Bactria so many cities and towns were built that the country came to be known as ‘the kingdom of a thousand cities.’<sup>28</sup> Although the rulers of Parthia had broken away from the Seleucid kingdom, they adopted Greek culture. They used Greek as one of their official languages, they adopted the Seleucid calendar and the Seleucid practice of minting coins, they commissioned statues of gods in Greek style, and had Greek plays performed.<sup>29</sup> To be sure, the Greeks were more influenced by the indigenous culture in India than in Bactria. Some of these Indo-Greeks converted to Buddhism (like the famous King Menander, i.e., Milinda).<sup>30</sup> Some issued coins with Indian and Greek scripts, while maintaining the basic features and form of Greek coins.<sup>31</sup> Thus the portrait head of the king and a Greek legend (containing the king’s name and his title) appear on the obverse, while Greek deities appear on the reverse. There are even some coins with Indian deities.<sup>32</sup> This was the general political and cultural milieu of the second century B.C. that Zhang Qian found when he arrived in Bactria on the eastern fringes of the Hellenistic World.

<sup>27</sup> For instance, although the Bactrians were civilized, those among them who had grown weak and helpless because of old age or sickness were simply thrown out alive as prey to dogs that were kept expressly for this purpose. Thus while the land outside the walls of the metropolis of the Bactrians looked clean, most of the land inside the walls was full of human bones. When Alexander came here, he put an end to the custom. Strabo’s account (11.11.3) comes from Onesicritus, a companion of Alexander and an author of the campaigns. Strabo thought that Onesicritus had not reported the best traits of the Bactrians but only their worst customs. On Onesicritus, see the recent study by Müller 2011, 45–66.

<sup>28</sup> According to Strabo (15.1.3), whose information comes from the *Parthica* of Apollodorus, Eucratides, king of the Bactrians, ruled over a thousand cities.

<sup>29</sup> According to Plutarch, when the head of the Roman general Crassus, killed in the battle of Carrhae in 53 B.C., was brought to the palace of the Armenian king Artavasdes, hosting the Parthian ruler Orodes II, the *Bacchae* of Euripides was being performed. Plutarch (*Crass.* 33) claims that Artavasdes could write tragedies, orations, and history in Greek. This shows clearly just how widespread the Greek language became and the infiltration of Hellenistic culture. For detailed information, see Dąbrowa 2011, 153–163. The Greek inscriptions of Parthian kings has been discovered at Babylon, see Assar 2003, 171–191. Even in the early first century A.D., official letters of Parthian kings were in Greek, see Wells 1934, 299–301. On the statues of gods in Greek style, see Kawami 1987, 73–74, 111–117 ; Cat. Nos. 44–48; Pls. 52–56; figs. 21–24.

<sup>30</sup> *The Sutra of the Buddhist Sage Nāgasena* 1670a, 1670b. Cf. Plut. *Mor.* 821D.

<sup>31</sup> On the coins of Indo-Greek kings, see Boppearachchi 1991.

<sup>32</sup> On the cultural interact between Greeks and Indians, see Yang 2011.



## The Diplomatic Missions of Zhang Qian

According to the ‘Collective Biographies of Dayuan’ in the *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Scribe*, 史记·大宛列传), Zhang Qian had been sent twice by the emperor of the Han Dynasty, Wudi, to the Western Regions on a diplomatic mission. The first mission occurred in 139–126 B.C. In Central Asia he visited four regions: Dayuan (大宛), Kangju (康居), the country of the Dayuezhi (月氏), and Daxia (大夏); he learned of five other large countries: Wusun (乌孙), Yancai (奄蔡), Anxi or Parthia (安息), Tiaozhi (条支), and Shendu or India (身毒).<sup>33</sup> His second journey took place between 119 and 115 B.C. Upon arriving at the Wusun, he sent representatives to ‘Dayuan, Kangju, Dayuezhi, Daxia, Anxi, Yutian (于阗), Hanshen (扞竿), as well as other neighboring countries.’<sup>34</sup> The travels of Zhang Qian mark the ‘official’ opening of the Silk Road. As a result, information about the Western Regions for the first time reached China. Hardly had Zhang Qian returned from his first mission that he reported to emperor Wudi the details of what he had seen and heard.

In the ‘The Collective Biographies of Dayuan,’ Sima Qian provides us with detailed information about the sedentary societies that Zhang Qian encountered, but not about the four nomadic confederations, or ‘moving nations’ (行国) as he terms them, namely, the Wusun, Kangju, Yancai, and Dayuezhi. His account contains information on each country, including its location, the distance from its location to China or to its neighbors, the size of its population, its type of government, cities and towns, goods that were produced, and information about its trade and commerce.

As to the location of these ‘moving nations,’ according to Sima Qian’s records the Kangju, Wusun, and Yancai were all nomads who migrated in the steppe region from the Caspian Sea and the Aral Sea in the west to the Tianshan and the Altai Mountains in the east. The Dayuezhi originally lived in the lands between Dunhuang (敦煌) and the Qilian Mountains in the west of central China, but later subjugated Daxia and settled down north of the Wei River (犛水, Amu Darya). Initially, the Dayuezhi occupied only Bactria in the north of the Amu Darya. Although the Dayuzhi tribes still preserved their nomadic traditions, they were unavoidably influenced by the remaining Greeks<sup>35</sup> as well as cultural remnants of their forefathers who had once controlled Sog-

<sup>33</sup> Sima 1959, 3160–6.

<sup>34</sup> Sima 1959, 3169.

<sup>35</sup> According to Lerner 2012a, the Greeks in Bactria did not disappear upon the conquest of the Greek kingdom of Bactria by the Dayuezhi or other nomads. Rather the Greeks lived under the hegemony of the Dayuezhi for almost one century, leaving their influence on the coins and the adoption of the Greek script by the Dayuezhi.

diana for nearly two centuries.<sup>36</sup> Dayuan, the first country that Zhang Qian visited in the Central Asia is generally identified with the Ferghana valley, corresponding to the area bordering modern Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirghizstan. This country formed a portion of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom.<sup>37</sup> Anxi (Parthia) underwent even more Hellenistic influences and has been regarded as a typical ‘Philhellenic Empire.’<sup>38</sup> Indeed, beginning with the great king Mithradates I, almost all Parthian kings called themselves “Philhellene” on their coins. Daxia (the land of Bactria, south of Amu Darya) and Tiaozi (the Seleucid kingdom with Antioch on the Orontes as its capital in the second century B.C.), and a part of Shendu (the northwest of India) had all been conquered by Alexander. When Zhang Qian arrived in Central Asia, Tiaozi still existed. However, Daxia, the Greek kingdom of Bactria, had just been conquered and the main part of Bactrian Greeks had retreated to India.

In terms of agricultural production, these regions not only produced grain but had a reputation for excellent wine as well. The wine had not originated in Greece. According to the latest research, the art of wine-growing and vinification had arisen in the eastern parts of modern Turkey in 8500–4000 B.C. and from there spread eastward and westward.<sup>39</sup> Because of their favorable geographical position near Anatolia, the inhabitants of Greece must have adopted viticulture and wine-making already in the Minoan period. By the time of Homer viticulture and wine-making had become an important part of Greek economic and cultural life. Not without reason, Dionysus, the god of wine, was one of the great gods in Greek mythology. We may assume, therefore, that Greek colonists introduced the grapevine or extended its cultivation in the areas under their control, bringing advanced methods of wine-making with them. They first introduced methods of viticulture to Susiana and Babylon. According to Strabo, ‘they did not trench, but only thrust into the ground iron-pointed stakes, then pulled them out and replaced them at once with the plants’ (15.3.11). Strabo also reports that the soil of Aria and Margiana, both bordering on Bactria, was well suited to the vine, and that the land in Areia especially was ‘exceedingly productive of wine, which can be kept good for three generations in vessels not smeared with pitch’

<sup>36</sup> Sogdiana had been controlled by the Greeks from Alexander the Great to the coming of Dayuezhi and other northern nomads. The king of Bactria Euthydemus I once ‘governed Sogdiana either as a satrap under Diodotus II, or as an independent sovereign’ and issued his own coins with the regal title and the bridled ‘horned’ horse, see Lerner 1999, 84, plate I-II.

<sup>37</sup> According to Strabo (11.11.2), the Greeks of Bactria once ‘held Sogdiana, situated north of Bactriana.’ Such a location should have included the Ferghana Basin.

<sup>38</sup> A. Toynbee (1959, 183) regarded Parthia as a ‘benevolent patron’ of Greek culture and an empire that was philhellenic. The affiliation between the Arsacid dynasty and Hellenistic culture has been discussed by many scholars, thus Frye 1984, 244–6; Dąbrowa 2011, 83 with n. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Cocke 2004.

(11.10.1–2). Related evidence can be found in Chinese historical records. According to the ‘The Collective Biographies of Dayuan,’ wine was one of the special products of Anxi, Dayuan, and other areas. Wine-making was so productive that wealthy people even stored wine in quantities of more than ten thousand Dan (Dan, 石) that could be kept good for several decades. From this we may infer that prior to Zhang Qian’s arrival in the Western Regions, viniculture and wine-making had become a profitable enterprise for many local people. This correspondence of western and eastern sources is not a coincidence, but a reflection of the history of viniculture in these regions. After Zhang Qian’s travels to the Western Regions, viniculture was introduced into central China by way of the Silk Road.<sup>40</sup> The pronunciation of the Chinese word *putao* (‘grape,’ 葡萄) is close to the Greek βότρυς (*botrus*), which means a ‘bunch of grapes’ and in the plural ‘grapes.’ The Chinese *putao* might even be the transliteration of Greek βότρυς.<sup>41</sup>

Another feature of his observations about the areas that Zhang Qian visited concerns their population and numerous cities. There were more than seventy walled cities in Dayuan, large and small, and an aggregate population of several hundred thousand. The number of cities and towns in Anxi reached several hundred and its territory stretched thousands of *li* (里), making Anxi the largest of the Western Regions. In Daxia there was no great king or supreme chief, but the cities and towns had their own lords or chiefs. The population of Daxia was more than one million.<sup>42</sup> Could there have been any connection between these numerous cities and towns and the city-building initiated in this region by Alexander the Great? The answer must be affirmative. As pointed out already, wherever Greeks settled, they built cities similar to those in their homeland. For the Greeks the city was the essence of the state. It was not just a place in which to live, but it was the center of their activities of politics, culture, education, and religion. Therefore, the Greeks had a special feeling for urban life and saw in the city their spiritual home. In the remote east, at a distance of about 3,000 miles from their homeland, they especially felt the need to build cities and towns like those at home, in order both

<sup>40</sup> Sima Qian maintains in ‘The Collective Biographies of Dayuan’ that ‘The envoys of the Han emperors brought the seeds of the grapevine and the purple medic back to central China. So the emperor Wudi (Tianzi, the Son of Heaven, 天子) began to plant them in lands of great fertility. The number of Heavenly Horses (天马) rose steadily and many foreign envoys came to the capital, so that the grapevine and the purple medic were planted over large areas near the palaces and hotels’ (*Shiji*, 3173–4).

<sup>41</sup> See Liddell, Scott 1996, s.v. According to P. Pelliot this explanation had been put forward by Ritter and confirmed by Kingsmill and Hirth. But he himself was doubtful of it. See Pelliot 1962/1995, 82–83. B. Laufer and W. W. Tarn did not agree to it either; see Laufer 1919, 225–7; Tarn 1951, 474. But this conclusion may be outdated.

<sup>42</sup> Sima 1959, 3160–4.

to preserve their cultural traditions and to rule over the indigenous populations. The size of the theater with seating for some 5,000 spectators discovered at the site of Ai Khanoum<sup>43</sup> tells us that the Greeks composed the main body of the city's inhabitants, and it suggests that their numbers were much larger than in other Greek cities in the region. Hellenized Bactrians and Sogdians should probably be included among their number.<sup>44</sup> The site also contains the largest Greek theater that has been unearthed in the east.<sup>45</sup> Thus it comes as no surprise that Zhang Qian must have encountered many cities and towns in these areas. His reports seem to confirm the well-known Greek passion for city-founding. Although the Greeks here were the ruling elite, they were immigrants and a minority compared with the local population of several hundred thousand, or even more than a million. It is difficult to imagine that a relatively small number of Greek soldiers,<sup>46</sup> left behind by Alexander, could have produced such a large population in two hundred years. We cannot assume that all cities and towns were of a Greek character, or that they were populated by hundreds of thousands of people. The indigenous people must have performed the agricultural work. But the existence of Greek cities and towns is a historical fact although the legend of Bactria as a country of 'one thousand cities' should be regarded as an exaggeration.

The political organization of these countries was based on kingship, as was the case in the Hellenistic states generally, but it seems that the aristocrats – local princes and chiefs – played an important role at key moments. A series of events in Dayuan serve to illustrate this point. After their refusal to provide rare horses (Hanxuema, 汗血马) to the Han emperor, the aristocrats had the Chinese envoys attacked and killed, and when their capital was besieged by a Chinese army they murdered their own king Wugua (毋寡),<sup>47</sup> apparently according to a well-

<sup>43</sup> Bernard 1982, 148–159.

<sup>44</sup> Plutarch wrote in *On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander*: 'Yet when Alexander was taming Asia, Homer became widely read, and the children of the Persians, the Susianians and the Gedrosians sang the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles' (Plut. *Mor.* 328D). It appears that the statement of Plutarch was not pure fantasy.

<sup>45</sup> Holt 2005, 156.

<sup>46</sup> Prior to his departure for India he garrisoned 13,500 soldiers in Bactria-Sogdiana (Arr. *an.* 4.22). Whether the number included the Greeks who had been settled in the cities and towns and the Macedonians who were too old, too weak, or too heavily injured to fight in battle, we cannot know. But there were at least 23,000 Greek and Macedonian soldiers in the colonies of the eastern satrapies after the death of Alexander in 323 B.C., see Holt 1989, 81, 88.

<sup>47</sup> The name of Wugua seems to be the transliteration of the Greek title ΜΕΓΑΣ (*Megas*) used for kings in their legends. In the Kushan period one king had no name, only the title ΣΩΤΗΡ ΜΕΓΑΣ (*Soter Megas*) on his coins (on his identity, see Yang 2009). Plausibly, *Megas* could be regarded as the name of the king. But whether Wugua in the *Records of the Grand Scribe* was just a transliteration of *Megas*, cannot be known for certain. This suggestion was made by Professor Zhang Xushan of Qinghua University, whom I wish to thank here.

prepared plan, after which they collectively negotiated for peace with the Chinese imperial government.<sup>48</sup> Clearly, these aristocrats could plot together and cooperate when faced with a common danger, and they were quite capable of murdering their own king. Does this mean that there was a kind of institution in Dayuan similar to the royal council at the courts of the main Hellenistic kingdoms? If so, this form of administration might have been the result of influence from the Greco-Bactrian kingdom.

In his reports on Anxi and Daxia, Zhang Qian refers to the existence of market-places in the two countries, and to the shrewdness of the local people in trade and commerce. For example, he mentions that the capital city of Bactria, Lanshi (藍市), had a market-place where various products were bought and sold.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, he told Wudi that he had seen in Daxia bamboo sticks from Qiong (邛) and cloth (Bu, 布, or silk,) from Shu (蜀) in the southwest of China. This implies that at the time Bactria was the nexus of a long-distance trading network linking western, southern, and eastern Asia. Since a great many Greek coins, their imitations, or those based on them from this period, have been unearthed, this clearly indicates that trade with coins as currency had prevailed in the Hellenistic kingdoms and adjacent areas.<sup>50</sup> Zhang Qian also mentions these coins in his reports because they were very different from Chinese coins which were round and had a square hole in the middle. In his report on Anxi, Zhang Qian described the coins of that country as 'made of silver with the bust or face of the reigning king on the obverse. When the king died, the coin had to be changed immediately, and the bust or face of the new king would appear on the new coin.'<sup>51</sup> The similarities between these coins and those of the Hellenistic kingdoms are noteworthy: first, the coins were made of silver; second, they bore portraits; third, the coins were replaced as soon as a king died with that of the new king. That coins bore the portrait of a king, was normal in the Hellenistic Age. In the beginning of his expedition Alexander issued a series of bronze coins with his own portrait at Memphis in Egypt.<sup>52</sup> After the conquest of India he issued a type of large royal medallion depicting him on horseback attacking the Indian

<sup>48</sup> See Sima 1959, 3176–7.

<sup>49</sup> Sima 1959, 3164.

<sup>50</sup> Since the first coin of a Greek king of Bactria, Eucratides (ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΕΥΚΡΑΤΙΔΟΥ), was discovered, numerous Greek coins have been unearthed in this area. The largest hoard has been found in the tiny village of Mir Zakah in Afghanistan. An estimated 550,000 coins have made their way to Japan, Europe, and America. This single hoard is almost six times larger than the total of all ancient hoards recorded throughout the territories of Greece and Macedonia, see Holt 2005, 125–148. For the discoveries of these various coins of Greek kings in Bactria (Daxia) and research on them, see Holt 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Sima 1959, 3162.

<sup>52</sup> Carradice, Price 1988, 109.

king Porus on his elephant.<sup>53</sup> After the death of Alexander, Ptolemy I also issued coins with the busts of Alexander in profile in 321–283 or ca. 315–305 B.C.<sup>54</sup> But it was Lysimachus, one of Alexander's generals, who created the standard coin-portrait of Alexander in 297–281 B.C.<sup>55</sup> Other successors of Alexander followed his example. When they set themselves up as kings, most of them issued their own coins with their portraits symbolizing their kingship. These coins circulated not only in the areas under Greek control but also in neighboring countries, such as Parthia (Anxi).

The Hellenistic coins minted in Asia can be divided according to their metal (gold, silver, bronze or copper, iron, and lead), or according to their denomination: stater, tetradrachm, drachm, and obol. In Parthia, however, almost all the coins were made of silver, with only a few gold issues that seem to have been meant as gifts. Parthian silver contain the portrait of the king on the obverse and on the reverse generally images of an archer seated with a bow (some scholars see in the archer Arsaces I, the founder of the Parthian dynasty<sup>56</sup>), or images of Greek gods such as Tyche, Nike, Demeter, or Heracles in the later coins, especially those issued by Mithradates I. The Greek legends are usually in the genitive.<sup>57</sup> The real name of the reigning king, however, is never mentioned on these coins, which makes it difficult to identify the king responsible for issuing them. What Zhang Qian brought back as information about the currency of Anxi was a simple description of its basic features, but the correctness of his observations are clearly shown by numismatic and archeological research.<sup>58</sup> The later Kushan kingdom, founded by a tribe chief of the Dayuezhi, also adopted this same type of coinage. The *Biographies of the Western Region in the Hanshu* (汉书·西域传) refers to similar coins in the reports on Jibin (罽宾), Wuyishanli (乌弋山离), Anxi, and Dayuezhi. Apparently, Greek or Greek-like coins circulated widely and were in use until the coming of Arabs. We may say that Zhang Qian's description of the coins of Anxi is the most accurate piece of information about Hellenistic culture that he brought back to central China.

<sup>53</sup> Holt 2003, Plates 2–14.

<sup>54</sup> Carradice, Price 1988, 116; Bieber 1965, 185, plate VI, fig. 12; Stewart 1993, 53, 280: Pl. 8c, Figs. 76–79.

<sup>55</sup> Carradice, Price 1988, 120; Bieber 1965, 186, plate VII, fig. 13; A. Stewart 1993, 53, 280: Pl. 8b, Fig. 117.

<sup>56</sup> Wiesehöfer 1996, 128.

<sup>57</sup> On the coins of some Parthian kings, including Arsaces I, Vologases II and Vologases IV, legends written in Aramaic letters appeared, see Sellwood 1980. The Greek and Aramaic/Parthian legends on Parthian coins can be found at [www.parthia.com](http://www.parthia.com).

<sup>58</sup> Numerous Greek or Greek-styled coins have been collected by museums and by private persons in various countries. Numismatists and historians are able to a large extent to establish the dynastic lineages of various kingdoms by studying their coins. The imagery and other information conferred by these coins can be accessed on [www.parthia.com](http://www.parthia.com) and [www.grifterrec.com](http://www.grifterrec.com).

Another important, though generally overlooked observation in Zhang Qian's report on Anxi, is his information on writing and writing material practiced by the people of the country. He tells us that in Anxi people wrote horizontally on sheets of leather.<sup>59</sup> Leather for this purpose had been used in pharaonic Egypt as early as the fourth dynasty (ca. 2750 B.C.); in a later period some copies of the *Book of the Dead* that accompanied the deceased in tombs had been made of leather.<sup>60</sup> Herodotus (5.58) notes that the Ionians used to write on the 'paper' made from the skins of sheep and goats, and that even in his day there were many 'barbarians' who wrote on this medium. Clearly, the use of leather as writing material had been known for some time before Zhang Qian made his observations. The word 'parchment', Latin *pergamena*, is derived from the name of the Hellenistic kingdom of Pergamum, whose king Eumenes II (197–160/59 B.C.) was said to have invented 'parchment' in order to break an Egyptian embargo on papyrus.<sup>61</sup> It is highly probable that the librarians at Pergamum improved upon known processes of parchment-making and created a kind of parchment that was clean, white, and could be used on both sides. Neighboring as it did on the Seleucid kingdom, Anxi probably became acquainted with parchment relatively early. In the 1960s at the site of Ai Khanoum French archaeologists discovered the remains of a sheet of parchment on which a Greek poem was written.<sup>62</sup> At other places in Bactria a few Greek parchments containing a tax receipt and records of payments were discovered.<sup>63</sup> This makes it certain that indeed parchment was known in Daxia when Zhang Qian visited it. Most probably, Zhang Qian saw such parchment as well as Greek texts written horizontally from left to right. This must have caught his attention, because the Chinese still used bamboo slips for writing and wrote vertically top down. Moreover, the language used in writing on parchment was almost certainly Greek because that was the common language in the Hellenistic world and well-known even by the upper class in Parthia. Sima Qian tells us that 'from Dayuan westward to Anxi, the languages and dialects of the countries are different but the customs are similar, and different peoples can understand each other's languages and dialects.'<sup>64</sup> Besides Iranian, another language that was commonly used was koine (κοινή, the 'common tongue').<sup>65</sup> It is certain that Zhang Qian heard that language spoken by

<sup>59</sup> Sima 1959, 3162.

<sup>60</sup> See Bar-Ilan 1995.

<sup>61</sup> Plin. *NH* 13.21.

<sup>62</sup> Wiesehöfer 1996, 114; Holt 2005, 160.

<sup>63</sup> Holt 1999, 176; Holt 2012, 118–120.

<sup>64</sup> Sima 1959, 3174.

<sup>65</sup> Tarn (1902, 278) recognized the prevalence of Iranian but assumed that also Greek was used in the cities, although he had no evidence to support that assumption. Since then, however, numerous examples of the use of Greek in the form of coins, inscriptions, pieces of parchment and papyri have been discovered in the region.

the local people when he was in the Central Asia. Otherwise, how could he have transliterated βότρυς (botrus) into Chinese *putao* (“蒲陶”)?

## Conclusion

Evidently, when Zhang Qian traveled from central China to the Western Regions, he came to a totally different world. What he encountered there was Hellenistic culture. Thus, Zhang Qian not only was the first person who had been sent on a diplomatic mission to the Western Regions and visited the world outside China, but also the first to bring back information about Hellenistic culture. His exploration of the Western Regions from the east and the conquests of Alexander the Great from the west for the first time made possible cultural and economic exchanges among the major civilizations across Eurasia. Hence, Chinese silk, lacquers, iron wares (complex wares of steel and iron, including the method of steel-making), leather wares, even methods of almond and peach cultivation, were all brought to the Western Regions and from there some of these items soon reached Rome.<sup>66</sup> Likewise, other exotica – animals and plants, musicians and dancers, even religions – were introduced to China from the West. One result of the fusion of ideology of Indian Buddhism and Greek art was the creation of Gandharan art, testifying to the influence of Hellenistic culture in the east. It was precisely this artistic style that reached central China by way of the Silk Road in the period after Zhang Qian’s mission.

The creation of the Silk Road should not be attributed merely to the ambition of the Han emperor Wudi to control the Western Regions and to the diplomatic missions of Zhang Qian, but also to the conquests of Alexander the Great and the formation of the Hellenistic world. It was the explorations and conquests from both East and West that gave the Silk Road its special place in history. An ancient Chinese poet once said: ‘if a person places willow branches into the soil without any expectation, he will be surprised years later by seeing a forest.’ This is true also of the Silk Road which linked East and West for over a thousand years and had great and long-lasting influence on the civilizations of Eurasia that both Alexander the Great and Zhang Qian surely could never have anticipated.

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<sup>66</sup> See Sima 1959, 3174; Plin. *NH* 34.145. Remains of silk from China have been discovered at the site of Palmyra, see Dien 2004; also Wiesehöfer 1996, 147.



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## Abstract

The conquests of Alexander and the formation of the Hellenistic world stimulated and accelerated cultural and economic exchanges among the ancient civilizations of Central Asia, India, the eastern Mediterranean, and Europe. Before Zhang Qian's exploration of the West in the late second century B.C., three trade routes connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe had already come into existence. Hellenistic culture had been widely received in areas formerly under Macedonian-Greek rule and had even, to some extent, converged with eastern cultures. Centered on the Oxus River, the Greeks of Bactria expanded their sphere of influence into India in the south and to the Seres and Phryni in the east. Perhaps they had even reached the Tarim Basin by crossing the Pamirs. All these developments created the basis for the development of the Silk Road and thus for trade and commerce and cultural exchanges East and West. In this regard, the eastward conquests of Alexander and the westward explorations of Zhang Qian played equally important roles in the opening of the Silk Road.