

# Rome and China

## Endpoints of the Ancient Silk Roads

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Research about relations between the Roman and Chinese empires has been popular, but most studies have concentrated on the history of mercantile contacts; less frequently has research examined the possible cultural links. Although it is widely accepted that the two realms had only indirect contacts—principally from the 1st through the 5th century CE, when products were moved through a series of middlemen via the vast networks of land and maritime routes stretching between the Mediterranean and East Asia—studies on Sino-Roman relations have mainly concentrated on textual sources and rarely looked into the archaeological evidence.

This article presents a range of archaeological materials from both the former territory of the Roman Empire and the People's Republic of China. Some are well known, and some are less recognized; all have been recontextualized in light of recent research. The aim is to gather the different data

within a richly illustrated format, in order to give insight into a more factual picture of Sino-Roman relations and to highlight the complexity of East-West intercultural communication networks of antiquity.

In China, the major group of archaeological objects of Roman origin is of transparent and translucent glass vessels. The earliest unquestionably Roman objects were discovered in the Ganquan region and in Luoyang, all with production dates in the 1st century CE. Two were unearthed in the Ganquan region from tombs of the first part of the Eastern Han dynasty (second half of the 1st century CE), and the one object from Luoyang was excavated from a tomb with a wider date range from the Eastern Han (25–220 CE). The small fragments of a purplish, marbled ribbed bowl from the Shuangshan tomb No. 2 (in Ganquan, Hanjiang, Jiangsu province) are particularly interesting in terms of the ascribed glassware (Fig. 1). The tomb is widely accepted to



Fig. 1 Fragments of a Roman marbled ribbed bowl  
China, Jiangsu province, Ganquan subdistrict, Shuangshan village  
Glass; 2–3 cm  
Courtesy of the Nanjing Museum

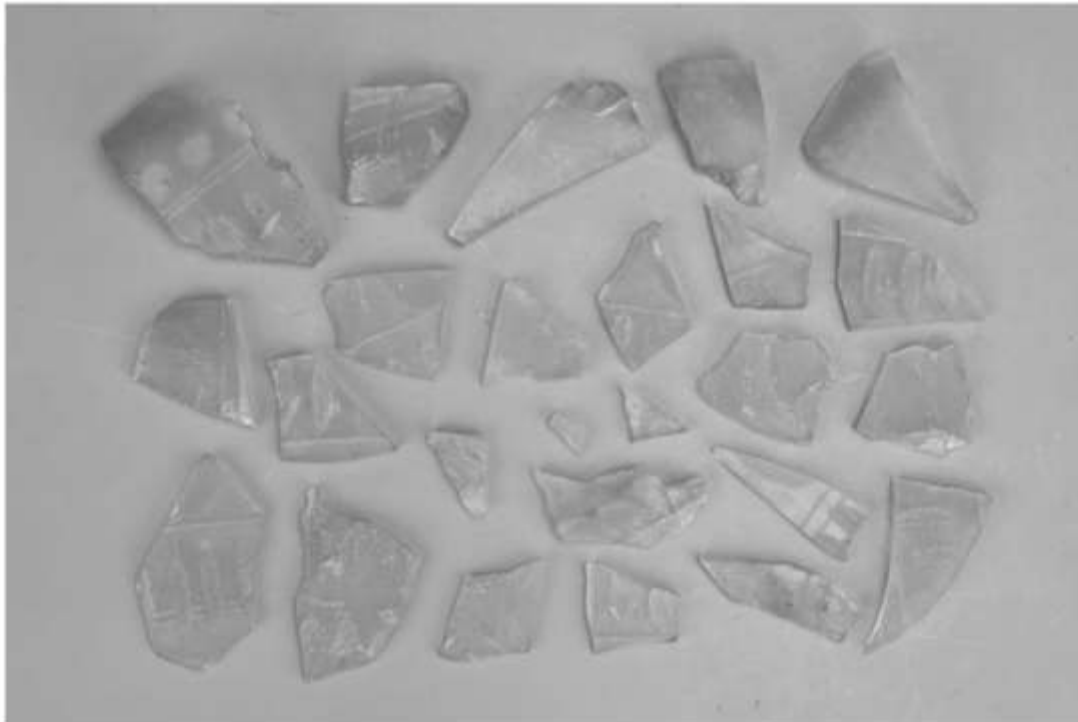


Fig. 2 Fragments of a Roman vessel  
 China, Nanjing, Beigushan  
 Glass; (largest fragment) height 5.5 cm, width 3 cm, thickness 0.2–0.5 cm  
 Courtesy of the Nanjing Municipal Museum

be the burial of Liu Jing, one of the younger sons of the Han Chinese emperor Guangwu. Soon after the death of Guangwu in 57 CE, Liu Jing, as the King of Guangling, rebelled against his elder brother, the new emperor. Liu Jing was forced to commit suicide in 67 CE. This year serves as the latest possible date for the arrival of the Roman glass bowl to China. It also suggests a relatively short period between the production and the burial of the object, as these specific types of bowls were predominantly made during the first half of the 1st century CE.

A significant accumulation of transparent glass vessels imported from the West can be observed in the Nanjing region. The vast majority of these glass vessels were faceted types, with a relatively wide span of dating, between the late 2nd and the 4th century CE, and all were discovered in tombs of the Eastern Jin period (317–420). In the case of the glass fragments discovered in the Shangfanglicun

Yanshan tomb, Nanjing University Northern Campus burial, Qilundianjichang tomb No. 2 (also known as the Beigushan tomb), and Xiangshan tomb No. 7, composition analyses are also available to confirm their Roman origin (Figs 2–3). Besides the above-mentioned examples, the previously Sasanian-attributed faceted glass bowl from Xianheguan tomb No. 6 is also more likely to be a Roman artefact (Fig. 4). In other cases, such as the fragments from Guojiashan, analytical techniques are needed to reveal their composition. However, placing the aforementioned relics in a social context of the above time periods, the bowls are somewhat similar regardless of having Roman, Sasanian, or uncertain origins. They were all discovered in tombs of Jin emperors and their closest men.

Tombs dated to the 5th and 6th centuries also contained glass vessels of Roman origin. One example is Feng Sufu's burial at Xiguanyingzi

(in Beipiao, Liaoning province), which originally contained five transparent glass vessels from the Roman and Sasanian empires. The deceased was the imperial minister of the Northern Yan state (407–436 CE), who died in 415 CE; his brother was Feng Ba (d. 430 CE), the founder and ruler of the Northern Yan. In Feng Sufu's well-designed stone sarcophagus, a unique glass vessel shaped like a duck, or possibly a sea creature, is very likely to be a Roman product of the 1st to 4th century CE (Fig. 5). The unique vessel referred to was discovered along with three other intact bowls and a fragment of a rim foot. Only one of the artefacts—a translucent, greenish deep bowl with a spherical body and round bottom—has undergone a chemical composition analysis, which points towards the Sasanian Empire as its place of origin.

It is clear that in China, from the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) to the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE) period, Roman glass vessels were in the possession of the highest stratum of the Chinese society—the emperors and their closest men—regardless

Fig. 3 Roman cup  
China, Nanjing, Xiangshan  
Glass; height 10.4 cm, rim diameter 9.4 cm,  
thickness 0.5–0.7 cm  
Courtesy of the Nanjing Municipal Museum



Fig. 4 Bowl of possibly Roman origin  
China, Nanjing, Xianheguan  
Glass; height 7 cm, diameter 9.1 cm, thickness 0.1–0.15 cm  
Courtesy of the Nanjing Municipal Museum

whether these artefacts were valued in the Roman Empire. Objects imported from the West were rare and precious since they came from distant places, and because the technique of glassblowing was unknown in China, presumably until the 6th century CE, their mode of production was mysterious for the majority of the Chinese society (as literary sources also suggest). Glass was believed to be an alternate for jade; regardless of how accurately transparent and translucent glass vessels could imitate jade, they might have been seen as possessing that material's ritual power as well, adding to the interest towards glass objects. Therefore, besides considerable material value, ritual and mythical features might have also been attached to these artefacts, and glass vessels might have been cherished as genuine prestige objects. However, perceptions towards transparent glass vessels changed after the 5th and 6th centuries CE as non-Han elites emerged in the north and as glass objects began to be attributed with a greater practical value. Also, due to the spread of the glassblowing technique, transparent glass vessels became more available. They were still regarded as expensive and precious items, but they lacked mystical attributes and were predominantly appreciated for aesthetic reasons by their non-Han owners. In addition, they were used more widely, for



Fig. 5 Animal-shape object discovered in Feng Sufu's burial  
China, Liaoning province  
Glass; height 201.5 cm, diameter 5.2 cm  
After: Liaoning Provincial Museum, 2015, Plate 30

not only tomb furnishings and treasures of emperors but also utensils of Buddhist rituals. Consequently, the reason why transparent and translucent glass vessels seem to have meanings beyond aesthetic recognition for consumers before the 5th and 6th centuries might have been explained by technical, ideological, and possibly cultural-ethnic differences between the receiving communities prior to and after this period. Thus, the peculiar appreciation towards these objects might have been connected to communities of the Han Chinese cultural sphere.

A more puzzling type of Roman-originated glass materials is beads discovered in the southern parts of China, such as a string of nineteen opaque-blue beads discovered in grave No. 17 Liaowei (in Hepu, Guangxi province) dated to the late Eastern Han dynasty, or the string of glass and other beads from tomb No. 5 Jiuzhiling (in Hepu, Guangxi province) dated to the early Eastern Han dynasty. Their chemical compositions suggest a Mediterranean origin; however, evidence shows that raw materials and production waste of Mediterranean origin were used in South and Southeast Asia for manufacturing glass. Thus, it is unknown whether those simple beads discovered in the Hepu tombs were produced in the Roman Empire or might have been made locally or regionally (Fig. 6).

Additional to the glass vessels, a silver platter from Beitan (in Jingyuan, Gansu province) is one of

the most recognized objects of Roman origin; it was discovered during a house construction. The richly decorated artefact with traces of gilding is presumed to have been made in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire during the 2nd or 3rd century CE.

Fig. 6 Beads of Roman origin  
China, Guangxi province, Hepu county  
Glass; (oval pieces) height 0.6–0.8 cm, diameter 0.55–0.7 cm;  
(oblate pieces) diameter 0.5–0.7 cm, thickness 0.3–0.5 cm  
After: Xiong, 2014, p. 263



Two secondary inscriptions have been discovered on its back. One is a variety of Greek cursive, indicating the weight of silver and perhaps representing a local Bactrian standard, possibly dated prior to the early 6th century CE. The other is the Sogdian word *šyr*, which is possibly the name of the owner, dated from the 5th to the 7th century CE. The platter clearly had different possessors during its travels from the Roman East to Gansu—someone from the region of Bactria and a Sogdian, at a minimum—thus its true provenance might have been forgotten. However, it still reveals a possible aspect of Sino-Roman

contacts: an arrested or undeveloped transference of luxury objects—perhaps spanning hundreds of years—that were actively or passively handled by the aforementioned series of middlemen (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7 Roman platter  
China, Gansu province, Beitai  
Silver; height 4.4 cm, diameter 31 cm, weight 3180 g  
After: Marshak, 2004, p. 184, cat. 90



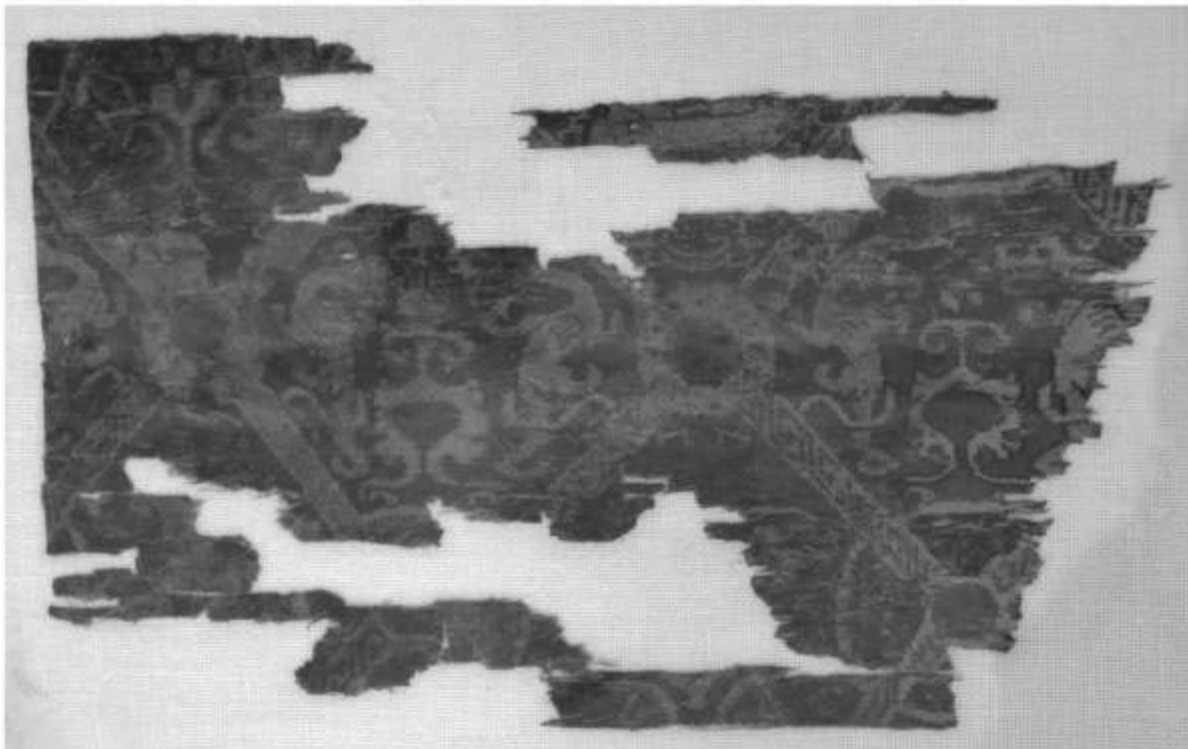


Fig. 8 Fragments of a Chinese textile  
Syria, Palmyra (present-day Homs Governorate)  
*Jin* silk; (larger piece) 28.7 x 17.2 cm; (smaller piece) 12.2 x 4.4 cm  
Photograph: Robert Żukowski

In Xinjiang, due to the region's cultural and ethnic diversity and its key location at the crossroads of multicultural interaction networks, numerous Western and other non-local as well as hybridized goods compose the corpus of the discovered finds, which justifies the treatment of the Roman objects from this region as a distinct group. At the same time, identifications of these different traditions are not always available. Moreover, the social background of the already identified Roman discoveries is very different from ones in the eastern coastal part of China. Regarding these peculiarities, Roman objects from Xinjiang are not included here.

In the former territory of the Roman Empire, the most recognized material of Eastern origin is undoubtedly silk, which is often associated with China regardless of its true origin. However, due

to silk's perishable nature as a material, apparent pieces of China-produced silks are very rare in ancient textile assemblages of the Roman Empire. Therefore, it is not surprising that the remains of *jin* textiles discovered in the ancient caravan city of Palmyra are highly recognized in archaeological literature. Illustrative examples were discovered in the merchant Kitot's tower tomb dated to the mid-1st century CE, which contained two exceptional fragments of *jin* fabrics with Chinese characters (Fig. 8).

As it is well recorded in texts and archaeological data, silk threads were also used and reused as raw materials, and both tabbies and yarns could be imported. Besides their presence in significant trading nodes, evidence of using raw or recycled silk of Eastern origin has been uncovered in significant and smaller sites of the Roman Empire. In the city of

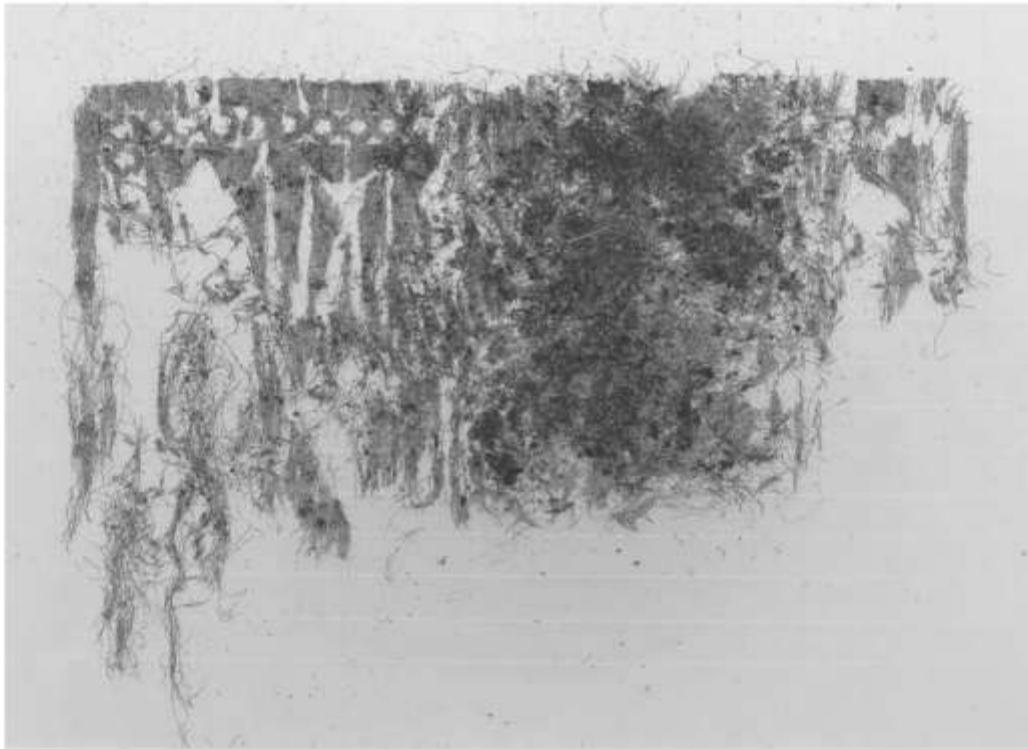


Fig. 9 Tapestry fragments with silk of uncertain origin  
Pannonia province (parts of present-day Hungary, Austria, and several Balkan states), Alsóhetény  
Silk-fibre core, gold thread; 15 x 10 cm  
Courtesy of the Hungarian National Museum

Rome, scanning-electron microscopy was applied to identify silk fibres of presumably Chinese origin in a fabric discovered in Gallery 28 of the catacombs beneath the church of Saint Agnes. Because of the lack of such analyses, fibre distinctions in the textile fragments from the collection of the Hungarian National Museum, discovered at sites in the Roman provinces of Pannonia and Moesia (in present-day western Hungary, eastern Austria, and parts of several Balkan states) are less certain. However, those typically 4th century CE provincial burials show the relative commonness of silk materials and present their integration into the Roman textile repertoire without any sense of their Eastern origin (Figs 9–10).

An exceptional example of Chinese finds in a Roman context is the nephrite scabbard slide from

Čatalka (in the region of Stara Zagora, Bulgaria) (Figs 11a–b). The artefact was uncovered from a richly furnished burial of a *cataphractarius*, a heavily armored type of Roman cavalry soldier, dated from the end of the 1st century CE to the beginning of the 2nd century CE. The scabbard slide was placed on a decorated iron sword, interpreted as a Sarmatian type, and served as a belt loop at the middle of the sheath. The find is significant because it is a Chinese object from a burial of a high-ranking Thracian officer of the Roman army, buried (partly) with Sarmatian artefacts (perhaps trophies or gifts), but it is also important because it emphasizes the often less-recognized role of Sarmatians as mediators between East and West.

Significant research opportunities are also provided by the study of mitochondrial genomes

and isotopes, as those might reveal relationships and geographic origins of non-local individuals or groups. One example is the 1st-to-4th century CE Roman cemetery at the imperial estate of Vagnari, in modern Puglia, Italy. Recent results showed that the ancestors both of an adult male (F34) who was most likely born at or around Vagnari and of a 45-to-49-year-old female (F37) originated from eastern Eurasia (possibly Asia proper) sometime prior to the 1st century CE; moreover, these two individuals might also share the same maternal ancestor. The exact social status of the two individuals is unknown as it is not possible to distinguish between slaves, freedmen, or tenants at Vagnari based on current archaeological evidence, but they were buried similarly to other individuals of the cemetery. Explaining the existence of these individuals in a Roman cemetery is still problematic: it is unclear whether the move of their ancestors was forced or willingly initiated and whether those people were enslaved, involved in long-distance exchange, or mere travelers. What can be inferred from the Vagnari graves is that the two individuals with non-local ancestors were buried according to local customs along with local grave goods, which reflects on how they were received by the local community.

Recent compositional studies on glass beads proved that the earliest, principally sporadic, indirect, and land-route-based links between the Mediterranean world and China existed long before the Roman era. During the 3rd-to-2nd century BCE, exchanges over land as well as via the Indian Ocean increased and the latter reached its peak during the 1st century CE up until the 2nd-to-3rd century CE, resulting in the relative accumulation of South Asian and East Asian objects, raw materials, and locally produced imitations, adoptions, and adaptations in the former territory of the Roman Empire. Similarly, a significant number of Roman artefacts along with locally made objects integrating Western and Roman elements of the early centuries CE have been discovered in South and Southeast Asia. At the same time, only a few of such objects reached China, predominantly via maritime routes.

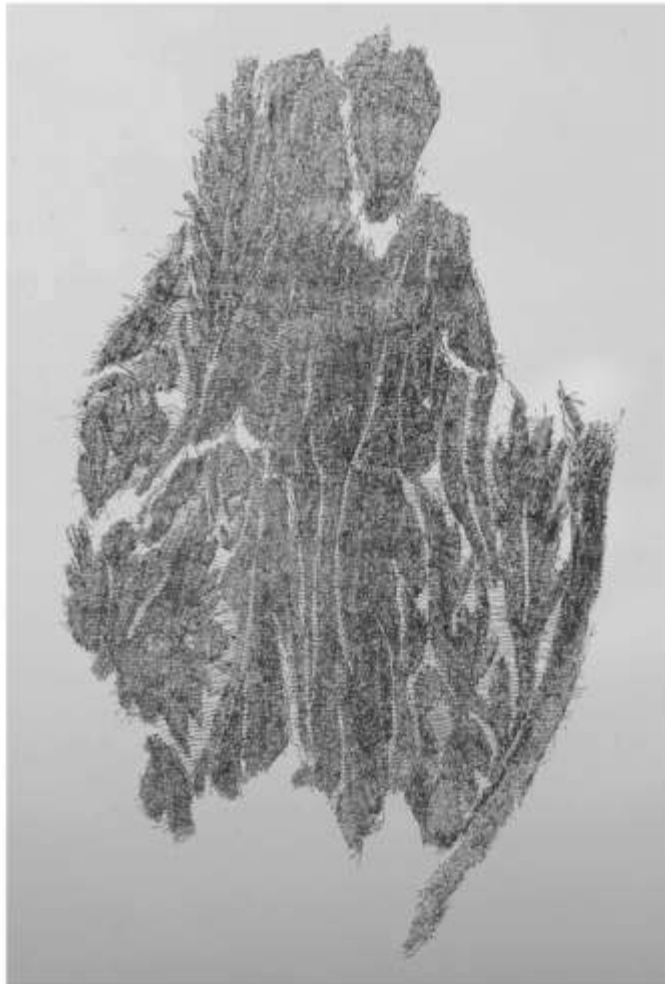
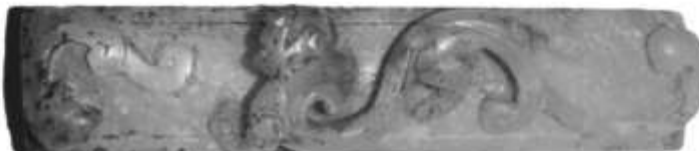


Fig. 10 Tapestry fragments with silk of uncertain origin, depicting goddess Victoria  
Moesia province (present-day southeastern Balkans), Viminacium  
Silk-fibre core, gold thread; 11.5 x 6.7 cm  
Courtesy of the Hungarian National Museum

The 3rd century CE can be seen as a period of recession followed by a reassessment of routes and networks, which gave greater importance to Sri Lanka and the southern regions of the Indian subcontinent. After this drop in exchange and a period of reorganization, 4th century CE links between the Late Roman Empire and China



Figs 11a–b Scabbard slide of Chinese origin  
Bulgaria, Čataalka  
Nephrite; 11 x 2.5 x 3 cm  
After: Kostov and Strack, 2021,  
p. 67, figs 1–2



developed a new trajectory, and and after the 5th century land routes also reached their apex, as the growing number of Mediterranean products suggest.

As indicated by the vague descriptions in both China and Rome, as well as the distribution and peculiar reception of Roman glass vessels and Chinese silk finds, indirect contacts rather than an immediate commercial trade existed between the two realms, in which certain objects were moved by a series of middlemen. These mediators influenced the evaluation and acceptance of these non-local artefacts by the receiving cultures. Identifying these intermediaries has been addressed in several studies, among which the role of people such as the Nabateans has already been pronounced. However, more understanding about mediators operating along maritime and terrestrial routes still requires further research, such as in case of Sarmatians, whose role has often been less emphasized.

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