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REVIEWS

Review article: XINRU LIU, *The silk in World History*, Oxford University Press 2010 (168 pp., \$19.95 paperback) and JOHN E. HILL, *Through the Jade Gate to Rome. A Study of the Silk Routes during the Later Han Dynasty 1st to 2nd Centuries CE. An annotated translation of the Chronicle on the Western regions in the Hou Hanshu* (2009), (\$ 39.99 paperback)

The Roman Empire and Han China are represented as the “twin powers” which reached their peak of extension and prosperity more or less at the same time. In fact, studies have recently noticed the numerous similarities between these two mighty empires at the opposite ends of Eurasia in their political, administrative and cultural circumstances and they have invited a comparative approach in modern scholarship¹. However, at that time, distances were too great to permit these kinds of comparisons, and an incomplete (if not archetypical) view prevails in all Ancient writings, whenever they deal with such distant populations in the other half of the world.

The main source for information are trade reports of merchants who explored these lands through the so-called Silk Road. This is the contemporary name for a complex of overland and maritime trade routes linking East Asia with Central Asia, South Asia, and the Mediterranean world in Ancient times named after the main item traded: Chinese silk. The popularity of “Silk Road Studies” is reflected by the growing number of studies devoted to this topic, and one of the latest contributions in this field is Professor Xinru Liu’s book. Professor Xinru Liu is currently Associate Professor of History in the Department of History in The College of New Jersey and has extensively published articles and monographs on this topic². This, her latest book, aims at being a comprehensive but accessible outline of the history of the Silk Road and the different peoples involved in this distant trade contacts at different times.

Chapter 1 (“China looks west” p. 1 – 19) explores the emergence of this network of exchange along the borders between agricultural China and the steppe nomads during the Han Dynasty. Chapter 2 (“Rome looks East” p. 20 – 41) and Chapter 3 (“The Kushan empire and Buddhism” p. 42 – 61) explain how Silk and other products such as frankincense, myrrh, and pepper, made their way to the Mediterranean and were introduced to Rome as luxury items (much to the regret of the moral critics of the day), either through the land routes leading to the caravan cities of Central Asia and the Syrian desert, or by the way of northwest India through the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, landing at Alexandria. In Chapter 4 (“A golden emerges” p. 62 – 86), the author explains how the Silk Road survived the collapse of the Han and Roman Empires, and in fact reached its heyday during the early middle age, when the Byzantine Empire and the Tang Empire took the place of the aforementioned empires in the Ancient world. The last two chapters (Chapter 5 “Transforming the Eurasian Silk Market”, p. 87 – 108; Chapter 6 “the Mongols and the Twilight of the Silk Road” p. 109 – 126) explain the extension of the silk culture with the Islam and the decline of the Silk trade by the 11th century due to the unsettled conditions in Central Asia and China during the Mongol invasions.

The most important contribution of this book is the author’s effort at tracing the interconnections of the diverse participants in the transcontinental Silk Road exchange. This is

¹ E.g. the studies presented in SCHEIDEL, W. (ed.) *Rome and China Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* (Oxford, 2009)

² Among her selected publications see *Connections Across Eurasia: Transportation, Communication, and Cultural Exchange on the Silk Roads* (New York 2007), *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges, A.D. 1-600*, (New Delhi 1988) and *Silk and Religion -- An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People in A.D. 600-1200* (New Delhi 1996)

especially remarkable in the first three chapters, which actually are more concerned with the development of the Silk trade route in the Ancient world. The role that caravan cities and semi-nomadic peoples played as intermediaries for Rome and Han China is properly emphasized, such as for the case of Dura-Europos in the Euphrates, and Palmyra, and Petra in the Syrian deserts which were eventually integrated into the Roman Empire. The author quotes and comments on the different sources available, not only Classical writers (namely, Strabo, Pliny the Elder, the anonymous writer of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, etc), but also direct sources such as the wooden tablets of the Great wall of China, and the inscriptions as well as the archaeological evidence supplied by Palmyraean and Nabatean tombs and temples. Selected pictures and maps serve to further illustrate the prosperity of those kingdoms and cities and the cultural forces underlying these commercial transactions.

However, this picture would probably have been more complete if the author had included some references to the evidence from Egypt and had commented on the role that the Nilotic cities and the harbours on the Red Sea Coast played in this trade. Most of the cargoes of goods from the Red Sea (notably, from the harbour of Myos Hormos and Berenice) reached Coptus through desert roads and then were shipped to Alexandria, the second largest capital of the Roman Empire. Archaeological evidence (remains from the different *hydreumata* or stations and watchtowers), inscriptions and papyri (e.g. *P. Vindobonensis* G 40822³) and especially the so-called archive of Nicanor, a collection of ostraka from the city of Coptus in the Nile Valley, attest the vast increase in trade following the Roman annexation of Egypt. In fact, all these documents provide actual information about the transportation, the objects and mechanisms of trade and the people involved in this transcontinental luxury commerce, not only for Roman Egypt but also for India (and indirectly for China⁴).

Prof. Xinru Liu is a specialist in Ancient Indian history and she perfectly exemplifies the cultural interactions and the spread of new ideas through the Silk Road precisely in this continent. The Kushans formed in northwest India and Central Asia (a strategic location with direct access to the overland silk routes and links to the ports on the Arabian Sea) one of the main empires of the Silk route; it is, however, one of the less known and treated in such type of monographs. Chapter 3 is entirely devoted to them, and through the author's wise interpretation of the scarce available sources, the reader will discover with fascination what was at its peak a rich culture, originated from the hybridizing of disparate elements, such as Greek language and art, Persian imperial grandeur, and Indian Buddhism. The Kushan nomads wisely relied on the local institutions and cultures which they encountered in their expansion. The result of such expansion was a kingdom that flourished from the late 1st to the early 2nd century CE under the rule of king Kanishka and which produced an eclectic culture, vividly expressed in the visual arts (mainly in coinage and statuary from the Gandhara region.)

A different approach to the question of Romano-Chinese relations is offered by the close study of the textual evidence. As far as the Chinese chronicles is concerned, this is particular necessary due to the relatively scarce attention given to them and the difficult and dubious interpretation of the information contained in these sources. This is the point of departure of John E. Hill's contribution.

³ *P. Vindobonensis* G 40822 or the so-named *Coptus-tariff* which actually provides a list of goods imported from India and taxes.

⁴ All this evidence is discussed in SIDEBOTHAM, S. E., *Roman Economic policy in the Erythra Thalassa 30 B.C.—A.D. 217* (Leiden 1986) and in ADAMS, C. *Land Transport in Roman Egypt. A Study of Economics and Administration in a Roman province* (Oxford-New York 2007), especially in p. 17-46 and 220-253. On Roman Eastern trade routes in general, see also WHEELER, M. *Rome beyond the Imperial Frontiers* (London, 1954) 141-207, MILLER, J. I. *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire 29 B. C. to A.D. 641* (Oxford, 1969), 119-152, RASCHKE, M. G. "New studies in Roman commerce with the East" *ANRW* 9.2 (Berlin-New York, 1978) 641-1359, YOUNG, G.K. *Rome's Eastern Trade: International Commerce and Imperial Policy 31-BC-AD 305* (London-New York, 2001)

Hill is an independent scholar who began working on this work in 1979 and since then has been updating his comment with scholarly books, magazines, and personal communication with scholars around the world. The book's contribution and interest is twofold: not only does he aim to interpret and connect the Chinese ethnographical references to the diverse peoples through the Silk route with other available sources (written or archaeological), but he also tries to give a more authoritative edition of the text with the appropriate linguistic comment⁵.

Hill's work is inspired by previous books on this subject, especially those by Hirth and Leslie-Gardiner⁶. Hill's contribution does not supersede the aforementioned works since those collected and interpreted all types of Chinese references to the Roman Empire up to the Qing dynasty, whereas Hill's concentrates on the so-named "Chronicle on the Western regions," a section of the *Hou Hanshu* (chapter 88), the chronicle of the Later Han dynasty. This Chronicle contains valuable information about the "empires of the Silk Road," such as the Roman, the Kushan, and the Parthian Empire. This compilation is derived from the contact reports of Han China with the west during the first great Chinese imperial expansion in the first few centuries BC. The most energetic of the Han emperors, Wu Ti (141-87 BC), sent his general Chang Chi'en on two major diplomatic mission westwards. Chang himself travelled as far west as Ferghana (in present day Uzbekistan), gaining first-hand intelligence on all the lands he passed through, and from oral sources and trade reports, on Bactria, India, and Iran as well. These first missions were followed by further expeditions that serve as the basis for the later written accounts with which Hill deals.

The identity of the author or compiler of the *Hou Hanshu* and the sources used for the composition of his account and textual tradition are also briefly treated (p. XV – XVI.) Some remarks on the English translation of the text (p. XVII – XX) and measurements in Chinese and Greco-Roman sources (p. XX – XXI) precede the Chinese text and the translation of the Chronicle of the western regions from the *Hou Hanshu* (p. 1 – 59). Hill's introduction also includes a historical overview of the different trade routes and the communications between West and East (p. IX – XIV as well as a colophon in p. XXI – XXII); it is, however, rather sketchy, since the author prefers to reserve much of it for the commentary and the appendixes. Consequently, the paragraphs with all their squeezed information give the impression of unconnected notes rather than a proper introduction. Hill, for example, claims that in the Hellenistic period Alexander's empire was divided into two, with Seleucus I (known as Nicator) claiming all the eastern part, whereas Ptolomeus I (known as Soter) was content to retain Egypt as his realm (see p. XI). But we know that the contenders were many and the power struggle at the death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE) was not somehow cooled down until the battle of Ipsus (301 BCE)⁷. What the author probably intends to say is that Egypt was not only the first Hellenistic kingdom to be firmly established at that moment but also the that lasted longer than any other one, namely until the Romans took possession of it. From the capital, Alexandria, military expeditions to neighbouring Ethiopia and the explorations of Agatharchides of Cnidus⁸ contributed to the opening of new trade routes to the Far East, which lately developed during the Roman Empire, when Egypt became an imperial province (in the way we have already noted *supra*). The Seleucids, on the other hand, were undermined by continuous rebellions and the proclamations of new kingdoms within their vast dominions,⁹ and this instability made it difficult for them to foster a proper policy of trade with the

⁵ See an online translation with comments on the following website by the same author: http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/hhshu/hou_han_shu.html

⁶ HIRTH, F. *China and the Roman Orient* (Shanghai-Hong Kong, 1885), LESLIE, D. D., GARDINER, K. H. J.: "The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources", *Studi Orientali*, Vol. 15. (Rome 1996)

⁷ See Diodorus' books 18-20 of his *Bibliotheca Historica*

⁸ Agatharchides' book (circa 120 BCE) is only preserved in fragments. See BURSTEIN, S. T. *Agatharchides of Cnidus. On the Erythraean Sea*. (London 1989).

⁹ The Greco-Bactrian kingdom of Diodotus, as named in p. XI, was not the only one; we can also name the prosperous Attalid kingdom in Asia Minor, modern Turkey, the Nabatean kingdom, in modern Jordania, etc.

East in competition with their enemies, the Ptolemies. It, therefore, seems that the introduction presents a rather excessive simplistic version of the facts, and one feels compelled to check other monographs such as Xinru's one presented in the first paragraphs in order to have a better grasp of the historical background.

The lengthy commentary (p. 60 – 465) includes pertinent and very specific notes on Chinese language and place identifications, and this is the basis, to which the more general remarks on the historical background of the trade and diplomatic contacts with the West later seem to have been added. Some of the notes in the commentary probably would have better suited a more elaborated introductory chapter. Also the extensive quotations drawn from monographs and articles, which the author includes time and again, contribute to the length of this commentary, and due to their repetitiveness and dubious pertinence, sometimes impede the reading of the commentary. It seems that the author excessively relies on this second-hand information, especially as far as the treatment of Rome's eastern trade in Greek and Latin sources is concerned (texts, epigraphy and numismatics.). Apart from the acknowledged use of *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* in the edition and commented translation of Casson and Huntingford, he seems to be quite unfamiliar with all the texts he quotes, and there actually are some confusions and mistakes. Texts are quoted by the translation's page and not, as common, by book number and chapter/paragraph/verse,¹⁰ and he even translates an Italian translation of an original ancient source into English¹¹.

Some of his adopted solutions in the commentary are rather questionable in a scholar's book. For example, he quotes newspaper articles from the online editions instead of using published archaeological reports or catalogues¹². He even pastes a Wikipedia entry¹³ which would have caused an outcry in a graduate paper from whatever university. Other basic reference works in Classical studies, on the other hand, are completely absent, so, for instance, Pauly-Wisowa's encyclopaedia (*PW*), which is still valid due to its complete references to the ancient Greco-Roman sources, or alternatively the Neue-Pauly (*NP*) and the Oxford Classical dictionary (*OCD*), which are in English and useful for their updated bibliographical notes. Those books, among some others, would have been a better point of depart for his research.

As for the bibliography (p. 643 – 689), there is a minor problem with some of the given instances included in the list of abbreviations since they do not actually correspond with the usual conventions in other scholarly publications¹⁴. However, more important is the fact that the author had decided to put the ancient sources and the secondary literature together in the same bibliography, instead of providing a more useful separate list for the ancient Chinese and Greco-Roman sources as well as their occurrences in the main text. His choice is not exempt from some inconsistencies,¹⁵ and some authors used in the commentary, so for instance Dio Cassius, Ammianus Marcellinus, or the *Historia Augusta*, are not included in the bibliography in any form.

¹⁰ E.g. the reference to "Lucan p. 210" in p. 280 corresponds to Lucan's *Pharsalia* X vv. 139-143 in the Loeb translation

¹¹ E.g. in p. 388 the author retains the Italian name "Flavio Giuseppe" for Flavius Josephus, the Jewish Historian who wrote his works in Greek. He also quotes there the historian Arrian (referred to as "Flavio Arriano") and his work called in Italian "impressa contro gli Alani" which was originally written in Greek and is commonly known in English as *on the Order of Battle against the Alans*

¹² For archaeological surveys in the area of Xinjiang the author quotes articles from China Daily (in p. 95-6, 278-9; Xinhua news agency(in p. 164, 190); for Roman coinage findings in India he quotes an article from the *Hindu newspaper Saturday*. See p. 285-6)

¹³ A Wikipedia entry on the Parthian king Pacorus II, which he retrieved on April 2007 (see p. 241),

¹⁴ E.g. *GEL* stands for the Greek-English lexicon, but it is commonly abbreviated as *LSJ* (for Liddell-Scott-Jones, the initial of the three authors) among Classicists.

¹⁵ E.g., Strabo appears under JONES (1924), ALY (1956) and (1957) - *i.e.* with the name of the editors and translators -, but Pliny appears twice under his name with two different translations,

In summary, Hill's work is an admirable demonstration of the great potential that lies in comparative analysis of the texts of the Greco-Roman world and Ancient China. The only regret is that the author does not feel himself on a sounder footing when he is not in his field of expertise. In spite of the painstaking and longstanding work of gathering information, the overall impression is not positive: Hill collects and discusses an extraordinary amount of comparative material, but the presentation of such seemingly disparate material is not always clear and accurate. Many Classicist and Ancient History readers will nevertheless get some profit from the exposure to the rich and detailed material contained in Hill's book.

Juan Pablo Sanchez

Review article: ANDREW ERSKINE, ed., *A Companion to Ancient History*, *Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009, pp. xxxvii + 693, ISBN 978-1-4051-3150-6, hardcover, US\$199.95)

I am wondering if we should have more *Companions* in ancient history in the 21st century since we already have numerous companions from the *Cambridge Companions* and *Brill Companions*, both series very focused and up to date. The *Edinburgh Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome* (2006) contains a variety of information about the classical world which makes it a useful handbook, and also in *Blackwell's Companions*, quite a few *Companions* have appeared since the new century, covering ancient history. So far as this paper is concerned, we may list the *Companions to the Ancient Near East*, *Archaic Greece*, the *Classical Greek World*, the *Hellenistic World*, the *Roman Republic*, the *Roman Empire*, *Late Antiquity*, the *Roman Army*, and *Julius Caesar*, all of which combined together cover almost every historical stage of ancient history chronologically. Is there any further space left for a *Companion to Ancient History*?

Having read through this a book (almost 700 pages), I realized we need Andrew Erskine's *Companion*. We are familiar with his *Companion to the Hellenistic World* in the same series, which received universal praise from both scholars and reviewers and it is now in its fifth reprinting. The present *companion* continues his editorial tradition. It is very carefully designed and the contents are thoughtfully arranged. Compared with single-volume ancient history of Chester Starr's *History of the Ancient World* (4th ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) or Hermann Bengtson's *Introduction to Ancient History* (University of California Press, 1970, translated from the sixth German edition), it is a new ancient history. Starr's *History* basically studies politics though economy and culture; Bengtson's *Introduction* deals with historiography, sources, disciplines and reference works of ancient history, which might be a little outdated now. I.M. Diakonoff, a Russian Marxist historian, edited *Early Antiquity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), including ancient India and China. It also has something to say about the economic condition and cultural achievements of the ancient civilizations. But it is a pity that the frame is mainly political. The rise and fall of dynasties played a very prominent role, and the relations between political, economic, and cultural history are mechanically interrelated. The most recent book on this topic, Neville Morley's *Writing Ancient History* (London: Duckworth, 1999) focused on methodology.

Blackwell's companion does not follow any of them but offers a new approach. There are eight parts and 49 chapters written by eminent scholars around the world: Evidence, Problems and Approaches, Peoples and Places, Encountering the Divine, Living and Dying, Economy, Politics and Power, and Repercussions which may be grouped into three categories, namely the work of ancient historians, the present view of ancient history, and the ancient history's relevance to today. Part I and II may be roughly ascribed to the first category and are quite theoretical. That the

Flavius Josephus also appears twice but with two different original works of his, and the author seems to ignore that the Justin quoted in his commentary is the Latin epitomator of the *Historia Philippica* originally written by Pompeius Trogus which appears as ARNAUD-LINDET (2003).