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Europe, goods and the yearning for foreign places

(2000 BC to 500 AD)

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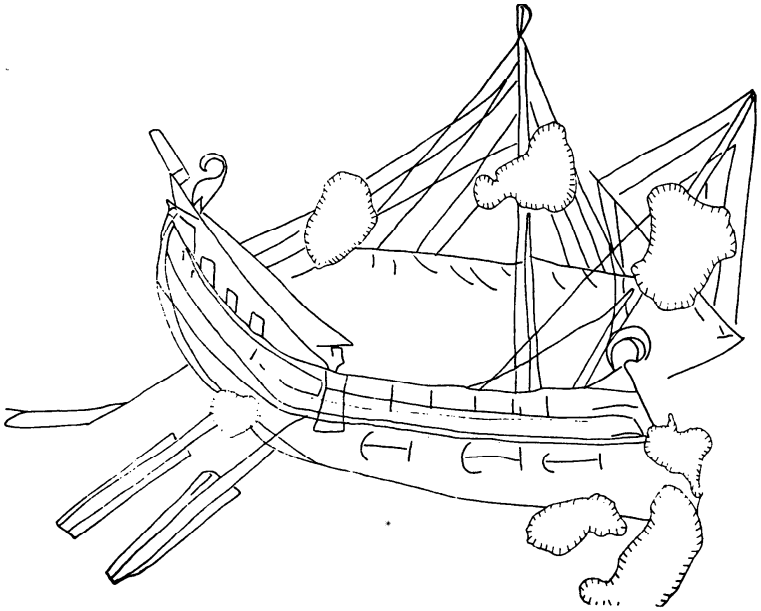

Ostia. Graffito of the "House of Jupiter and Ganymede".

Statement by P. Pomey, *Archaeonautica*, 11, 1993, p. 160.

I. The immobilist vision of the past 3
1. The argument a silentio, its strength and limitations 3
2. An ancient prohibition. Aristotle's teaching and its consequences for European geography 3
3. Contemporary prohibitions. The teaching in the 20th century of Fernand Braudel and Roger Dion, professors at the Collège de France 4
4. Conditions for progress, the confrontation of sources in various languages 4

II. The great Western circulations of the Greek and Roman periods 4
1. The Phoenicians and the Gibraltar Lock 4
2. A fierce struggle, in the Greek era, for strategic products (tin) or luxury products (amber) 5
3. A thunderbolt in the archaeological sky: the discovery of the tomb of Vix (Côte d'Or, France) 6
4. The teaching of Vix. Archaeological realities and economic models, ... 6
Archaeological Reality, American economic models 6

III. The roads of the Far East 8
1. A terrible discovery of Chinese silk: the Roman defeat of Carrhae (53 B.C.) 8
2. The mysteries around the "sources" of silk as well as its routing 9
3. The "sources" of silk 9
4. The refusal to take into account the information provided by Pliny the Elder by Paul Veyne (Pr. Collège de France) 10
5. Variations in Chinese silk imports 11
6. First and rapid assessment of the Roman quest for the Far East 12
7. A Roman adventure: the use of garum and, more generally, fish sauces 12
8. Rome, faced with India's entry into the game, mainly during the imperial era 13
9. China again and again 14

Bibliography 16

“People are born, live and die where God had them born”. This statement from the past has often been put forward in a variety of forms, associated with images of people and objects circulating in a confined radius. This point of view, largely accepted until the late 20th century, turns out to be wholly incorrect and we must consider that goods have circulated over long distances since the dawn of time. A perfect illustration of this is the circulation of obsidian in the pre-historic age. This conclusion, which matured at the end of the 20th century, is no longer a matter of debate. Economic models have been elaborated on this subject, generating lively discussions on which we can now provide a report.

I. The immobilist vision of the past

1. The argument a silentio*, its strength and limitations*

The static vision of the past was based on claims, developed as negations, from both antiquity and the modern period. Before tackling this, we need to discuss an intellectual and archaeological approach known as an argument from silence, or *ex silentio.* This type of reasoning rests on an observation, that a type of object or a culture – material or spiritual – has not been found in a specific geographic area. As the archaeological analysis is considered sufficient in quantitative terms, the conclusion is that these objects or this culture never existed in the space studied. This type of approach, which cannot be ignored, notably in archaeology, is very precarious, however, despite it being used universally today. From a strictly opposite point of view, but which is perfectly explanatory, the ideal argument in favour of irrefutable archaeological dating is the one provided by a closed environment; one that was closed at one fell swoop. The best example is Pompeii, whereby the courtiers of the king of the Two Sicilies were not able to penetrate the thick layer of lava that settled with the eruption of Vesuvius, and which only a few months ago was dated to October 79 AD thanks to a recently discovered inscription which provides a *terminus ante quem*. In short, all objects found in Pompeii precede the date of October 79 AD.

2. An ancient prohibition. Aristotle's teaching and its consequences for European geography

In these terms, without going into the detail of these approaches, it is clear that the road to discovery is paved with difficulties and that they date back to Antiquity. In fact, for a long time and since this period, two claims implied a vast geographic system based on the Greek cosmography and the teachings of Aristotle. The first, which is a given, claimed that the earth was round. The second, which was equally correct, claimed that a gain in latitude was necessarily associated with increasingly intense coldness. Generally, this was true, but one exception, which Aristotle had not foreseen, undermined this. This was the Gulf Stream, with its effects on the western European climate and a warming that conflicted Aristotle's doctrine.

The consequence was immediate: Pytheas of Massalia, who explored Northern Europe in the middle of the 4th century BC, was accused of lying. In Ireland or Britain, he had witnessed a relatively mild climate, seen a lot of grass and not much of these icy lakes described much further north in latitude. The earth was round. Aristotle and the Greeks were right, but the effects of the Coriolis force had not yet been discovered.

3. Contemporary prohibitions. The teaching in the 20th century of Fernand Braudel and Roger Dion, professors at the Collège de France

More than a thousand years later, modern negations joined the debate. Fernand Braudel had a slightly fearful vision of navigation of the Atlantic, regarded as *cabotage*. This was grossly inaccurate. For Roger Dion, it was impossible for antique ships to cross from the Atlantic into the Channel. It was also very far removed from the truth, as proven by the distribution of Italic amphorae on the Atlantic coasts, studied by R. Sanquer and P. Galliou.

4. Conditions for progress, the confrontation of sources in various languages

These imaginary negations were widely rejected, and writings in different languages, but with converging conclusions, were compared. The comparison of Latin, Greek and Chinese sources led to considerable progress on the knowledge of circulation of many products, such as tin or silk, in the antique and medieval universes.

Not only did the main routes exist at much earlier dates, but their use was the subject of economic and military confrontation, on both land and sea. Put simply, their access was often associated with fierce battles of all kinds; one of the best examples is illustrated by the practices of the Phoenicians near Gibraltar.

II. The great Western circulations of the Greek and Roman periods

1. The Phoenicians and the Gibraltar Lock

At an early date, probably from the end of the second millennium BC, the Phoenicians passed in one stretch from the bottom of the eastern Mediterranean to the far western region. For a long time they tried to confine the Atlantic trade for themselves alone.

> *"Formerly the Phoenicians alone carried on this traffic from Gades, concealing the passage from every one; and when the Romans followed a certain ship-master, that they also might find the market, the shipmaster of jealousy purposely ran his vessel upon a shoal, leading on those who followed him into the*

same destructive disaster; he himself escaped by means of a fragment of the ship, and received from the state the value of the cargo he had lost."

Strabo, III, 5, 11, translation H.C. Hamilton, W. Falconer, 1877.

Accepting the prohibition with difficulty, the Greeks tried to bypass the obstacle by land. Marseille, and perhaps pre-Roman Narbonne, became the end points of long lines of land-based trade, with starting points sometimes situated on the coasts of the Channel.

"Tin also occurs in many regions of Iberia, not found, however, on the surface of the earth, as certain writers continually repeat in their histories, but dug out of the ground and smelted in the same manner as silver and gold. For there are many mines of tin in the country above Lusitania and on the islets which lie off Iberia out in the ocean and are called because of that fact the Cassiterides. And tin is brought in large quantities also from the island of Britain to the opposite Gaul where it is taken by merchants on horses through the interior of Celtica both to the Massalians and to the city of Narbo, as it is called. This city is a colony of the Romans, and because of its convenient situation it possesses the finest market to be found in those regions."

Diodorus Siculus, V, 38.

2. A fierce struggle, in the Greek era, for strategic products (tin) or luxury products (amber)

Although taking many forms, the battle developed around the supply of tin. Five per cent of tin is necessary to mix with copper to make bronze; since the Bronze Age, this mineral had been of considerable importance. To understand the issue, it is sufficient to add that there were no, or hardly any, tin deposits in the Mediterranean, but it was available in Northern Spain, Armorica (alluvial, depleted in the Roman period) and in Britain. This explains the key role of the Cassiterides islands (island of tin, *cassiteros*), which Greek sources sometimes position off the Spanish coast and sometimes off the coast of Britain. Concerning the latter, the Isle of Wight (Ictis in Antiquity) probably played the main role, with a transhipment followed by 30 days on horseback for ingots heading to Marseille.

This trade was shrouded in mysteries and secrets, with the Greeks taking over from the Phoenicians when it came to secrecy. The Romans interrogated the Greeks at length about this trade, but in vain. As for the Gauls, they lied as much as the Greeks and said they knew nothing.

"The Marseillese, [says he,] when interrogated by Scipio at their meeting, had nothing to tell about Britain worth mentioning, nor yet had the people of the Narbonnaise, nor those of Corbilo, notwithstanding these were the two principal cities of the district..."

Polybius in Strabo IV, 2, 1, translation H.C. Hamilton, W. Falconer, 1877.

Much later, probably in the 1st century BC, the Romans ended up finding the tin routes. Enraged, they widely publicised their discovery.

> *"The Romans nevertheless by frequent efforts discovered the passage, and as soon as Publius Crassus, passing over to them, perceived that the metals were dug out at a little depth, and that the men were peaceably disposed, he declared it to those who already wished to traffic in this sea for profit..."*
>
> Strabo, III, 5, 11, translation H.C. Hamilton, W. Falconer, 1877.

3. A thunderbolt in the archaeological sky: the discovery of the tomb of Vix (Côte d'Or, France)

Although not illustrated by such fierce battles, amber was also the subject of long-distance trade which brought the fabulous product to Greece and Italy. For J. Kolendo, in the 6th to 7th centuries BC, it was amber from the shores of the North Sea that played the main role; however, amber from the Baltic, which already had its share in the imports, subsequently took over under the Roman Empire. The go-betweens of this trade were, of course, the Celts, of which the *oppida*, notably in Moravia, delivered "huge quantities of amber", with this trade ending in the Transpadane regions where amber was so commonplace that it was worn as necklaces by peasant women.

The idea of the early existence of long-distance trade was finally established following the discovery of Vix (Côte d'Or, France). This Greek vase, discovered in the middle of the 20th century in Vix, in the tomb of "the lady of Vix", as named by J. Carcopino, a Celt princess, is an entirely exceptional object due to both its size and its décor.

It doesn't matter that this vase generated practically endless discussions as to the routes used, such as the Rhône Valley (M. Clavel-Lévêque), or Alpine corridors (CI. Rolley). Its origin – southern Italy for CI. Rolley, Sicily for J.-P. Morel –, too, was highly disputed. Was it a diplomatic gift, as many thought? Maybe, but there is no certainty about this.

4. The teaching of Vix. Archaeological realities and economic models,

Archaeological Reality, American economic models

The lessons from this discovery were considerable. In Hallstatt C and D (600-450 BC), the culture of which extended from Moravia to the Paris basin, there were feudal lords, vassal rulers and deputies, whereas until this point there had been practically only warriors. The first were buried in *tumuli* (in a wooden chamber, with a chariot and horse harnesses) and escorted into the after-life by a host of imported objects which demonstrated their power (metal vases, wine sets, objects in gold, coral, glass, amber or silk). These same imported elements disappeared into the graves of the second group, while the graves of the third group contained only weapons and lignite armbands.

In this aspect, the Greeks found such vast and fabulous openings for some of their products that the emergence of the objects from their world brought about a change in the Celtic societies, and in any case emphasised social divisions.

Consequently, it clearly appeared that in the protohistoric period, a non-monetary trade existed, defined as a "trade of donation" between kings or rulers, following a precise ritual and which only concerned goods of high value reserved for a restricted elite. The following step, studied at length by K. Polanyi, was that of organised trade or treaties, founded on formal relationships between rulers or between cities, whereby the goods met standards. We only need to look at the diagrams of K. G. Hirth, who highlighted the concept of hinge communities – located in contact with several zones, in trading regions, between supply and demand zones, and at the very heart of communication corridors – to find, in English, the economic model of an idea that had long been widespread in France, which insisted on breaking loads, moving from water to land and vice versa.

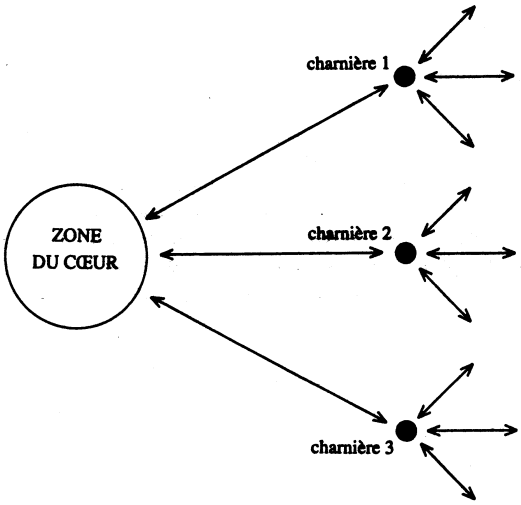

Figure 1 - Model of a multi-door system, from B. Cunliffe.

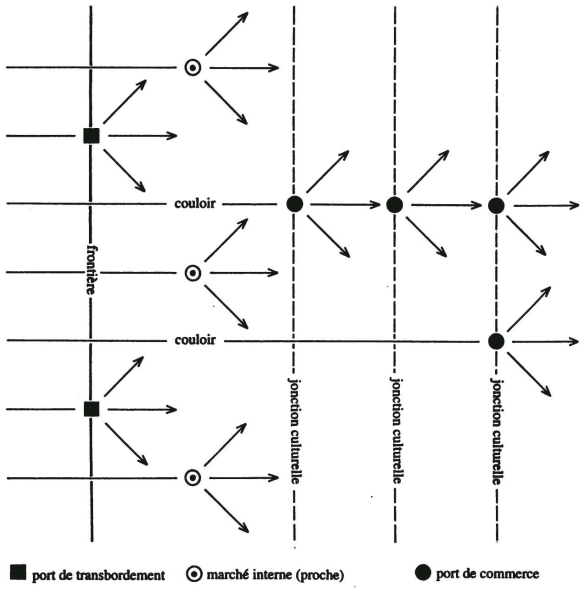

Figure 2 - Diagram of trade in Gaul around 100 BC, from B. Cunliffe.

This happily put trade movements concerning luxury objects in Europe back in the proto-historic period.

III. The roads of the Far East

1. A terrible discovery of Chinese silk: the Roman defeat of Carrhae *(53 B.C.)*

The case of the trading routes of the Far East also includes all kinds of clashes, sometimes very violent, with a terrible Roman military defeat, antique mysteries and a contemporary denial, or in any case a somewhat amusing incident under Marcus Aurelius, with Chinese silk often in the background of all of these events. It was to play a large role in the history of Rome.

In fact, silk made a sensational entrance into the history of the city with the terrible defeat of *Carrhae* (53 BC), where Crassus, who dreamed of glory in the East akin to that of Caesar in the West, was severely defeated by the Parthians and was killed. Not only had he made some serious military errors by underestimating the power of the Parthian horsemen and the archers, with their dangerous and deadly arrows, but he and his army were tricked by the Parthians into shooting into the light. They also used deafening drums and brandished large flags in red silk embroidered in gold, with the aim of blinding the Romans who lost their footing when the arrows flew.

2. The mysteries around the "sources" of silk as well as its routing

That said, and without wanting to belittle this event in any way, it shows that silk arrived in Europe from the 1st Iron Age, or perhaps even before. It was found, in fact, in small quantities in the Hallstatt tumuli in southern Germany. How it arrived there and how it was made were still mysteries, and this uncertain situation lasted well into the Roman period. Reading Pliny the Elder (23-79 BC) should convince us of this. There is no doubt that this great scholar got lost in his files and that his statements, sometimes contradictory, were been harmonised. At his time, people still speculated, in fact, that in the land of Serica (the Chinese), silk grew on... trees.

> *"The first people that are known of here are the Seres, so famous for the wool that is found in their forests. After steeping it in water, they comb off a white down that adheres to the leaves; and then to the females of our part of the world they give the twofold task of unravelling their textures, and of weaving the threads afresh. So manifold is the labour, and so distant are the regions which are thus ransacked to supply a dress through which our ladies may in public display their charms. The Seres are of inoffensive manners, but, bearing a strong resemblance therein to all savage nations, they shun all intercourse with the rest of mankind, and await the approach of those who wish to traffic with them."*
>
> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, VI, 20, 2, translation J. Bostock, 1855.

That being said, Pliny had perfectly grasped some aspects of silk farming as he was able to write that silk came from a worm, despite being unaware of the cocoon unwinding detail, although he spoke of the "Assyrian silkworm" and the unwinding of other varieties, which again shows that he did not properly summarise the information he had!

> *"It is in this state that they are taken; after which they are placed in earthen vessels... a peculiar sort of down soon shoots forth upon the body... The cocoons are then drawn out into threads by means of a spindle made of a reed. Men have not even felt ashamed to make use of garments formed of this material, in consequence of their extreme lightness in summer. So greatly have manners degenerated in our day, that, so far from wearing a cuirass, a garment even is found to be too heavy. The produce of the Assyrian silk- worm, however, we have till now left to the women only."*
>
> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, XI, 27, 2, translation J. Bostock, 1855.

3. The "sources" of silk

It is therefore clear that, in Rome, knowledge concerning silk was mediocre for a long time. If we look at M. Besnier, it seems that the fabrics that prevailed in the West before the 3rd century AD were not made entirely of silk. Prior to this date, Chinese fabrics were imported as a raw material and reworked upon their arrival, thanks to a *parfilage* operation which

separated the silk threads, which were then dyed and woven again with a blend of linen and cotton.

Whatever the truth may be, this luxurious textile soon became the rage. The fondness of the Roman high society for silk clothing soon turned into hysteria, leading to violent reactions for moral and economic reasons. Pliny the Elder's writings in view of this worsening situation illustrate this perfectly. In fact, in attributing the invention of weaving of what he called the "bombycina" to a woman of Cos, Pamphile, daughter of Platea, he rails against these garments, saying "while they cover a woman, at the same moment they reveal her naked charms".

> *"There is another class also of these insects produced in quite a different manner. These last spring from a grub of larger size, with two horns of very peculiar appearance. The larva then becomes a caterpillar, after which it assumes the state in which it is known as hombylis, then that called necydalus, and after that, in six months, it becomes a silk-worm. These insects weave webs similar to those of the spider, the material of which is used for making the garments of females, known as bombycina. Pamphile, the daughter of Platea, was the first person who discovered the art of unravelling these webs and spinning a tissue therefrom; indeed, she ought not to be deprived of the glory of having discovered the art of making vestments which, while they cover a woman, at the same moment reveal her naked charms."*
>
> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, XI, 26, translation J. Bostock, 1855.

4. The refusal to take into account the information provided by Pliny the Elder by Paul Veyne (Pr. Collège de France)

Tiberius had preceded him, trying in vain to prevent the use of silk, for economic reasons, due to the expense. However, a few hand-picked senators, convened at night to the Imperial residence, were soon faced with the sight of Caligula clothed in silk, engaged in an initiatory dance.

The position of Pliny was fairly largely justified due to the colossal sums at stake. But what did he mean when he said "one hundred million of sesterces" withdrawn every year from the Roman Empire by this trade? A trade that mainly concerned objects of luxury, but which was increasingly regarded by the Roman aristocracy as an absolute necessity. But what else?

> *"At the very lowest computation, India, the Seres, and the Arabian Peninsula, withdraw from our empire one hundred millions of sesterces every year — so dearly do we pay for our luxury and our women. How large a portion, too, I should like to know really comes to the gods of heaven, and the deities of the shades below?"*
>
> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, XII, 84, translation J. Bostock, 1855.

Historians still cannot agree on this statement. For P. Veyne, who contests the traditional idea of a "haemorrhage of Roman gold", Pliny's indication concerns only money paid out, but not the trade balance. In short, Pliny does not mention, and we know it existed, exports of Roman trade to the East, such that Pliny's words would not necessarily indicate that the haemorrhage of gold actually existed.

However, there is barely any doubt that there was an outpouring of gold because Cicero describes a quaestor under his consulate (63 BC) who, under his orders, searched houses and ships in Pozzuoli looking for gold or silver, the export of which had just been banned by the consul.

> *"In that magistracy, were you not sent by me, as I was consul, to Puteoli, to prevent gold and silver being exported from thence? While occupied in the discharge of that duty, as you acted as if you supposed that you had been sent, not as a guardian to take care and keep the wealth at home, but as a carrier to distribute it, and as you in a most robber-like manner were examining into every one's house, and store, and ship, and harassing men occupied in business and in trade, frightening merchants as they disembarked from their ships, and delaying them as they were embarking, — do you recollect, I say, that violent hands were laid on you in Puteoli and that the complaints of the people of Puteoli were brought before me as consul? "*
>
> Cicero, *Against P. Vatinius,* V, 12, translation D. Youge, 1891.

It is also true that his speech "Pro Flacco" was sometimes understood as targeting Jews, paying their tax to the Temple in gold. Whether or not this situation had considerable consequences, the outflow of gold was nonetheless already largely commercial. As for the outflow of Roman money to India, this is well attested, for a later period, with the discovery of 19 Roman coin deposits, of which 17 in the south of the peninsular until 64 AD, when the Denarius devalued by 18.5% in favour of gold. After Trajan, the deposits recovered. This all confirms the Latin or Greek texts and the Indians' relationship with pure metal, silver and gold, until Nero, who devalued silver.

5. Variations in Chinese silk imports

As for silk, it had become a major element in the Roman landscape, and the relationship with the Chinese and their emperor was punctuated over the centuries with different delegations. Going back in time somewhat, it is necessary to recall that Augustus received Chinese ambassadors who offered sumptuous gifts, notably precious stones; that another Chinese ambassador was received by Antoninus and that earlier, under Marcus Aurelius, a somewhat amusing affair illustrated Roman imperial relations with the Far East. It was in the ninth yanxi year, therefore 166 AD. A few outlaws, because that's probably what they should be called, requested an audience with the Chinese Emperor Huan-ti, from the Han dynasty, in the name of An-Tun, king of Da Quin, in other words Marcus Aurelius and the Roman Empire. They were not really imposters, but simply greedy merchants, as the Chinese probably thought, in view of the paltriness of their gifts to the emperor: ivory tusks, rhinoceros horns and turtle

shells, gifts that were redolent of average trade on the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, even though one could have believed that they arrived in China via Tonkin. Despite the high value of rhinoceros horn, a few products were missing from their gifts, for example peacocks or kingfisher feathers, “lurid cockerels", or fighting ducks, or scented herbs, incense resin, grapes, and of course, pearls, or - the peak of refinement - western silverware or perfumes, not mentioning the “large bird of Chaldea” or the “Parthian peacock” (ostrich).

6. First and rapid assessment of the Roman quest for the Far East

The courtiers of the Chinese emperor were very disappointed, and rightly so, with such gifts. This did not prevent the establishment of successful relations following an envoy of the Roman ambassador to China, still under the rule of Marcus Aurelius, which presented the Chinese emperor with elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns, which was altogether more serious than the envoy regarded as Roman that arrived in China in 120 AD, as this time there was a magician. That being said, it should be understood that these were not the only diplomatic actions, as they were doubled with solid attempts to explore the distant Far East regions. Probably in around 100 AD, seriously equipped individuals set off on a voyage on the long land routes. They were men working for a very important merchant, a “Macedonian”, who we can definitely regard as a Greek, living in Syria, by the name of Maes Titianos. Through his employees, he had organised a large expedition to China, which possibly intended to explore access to the Chinese section of the silk road, probably beyond a major site that Ptolemy called The Stone Tower (identified as Tashkurgan, two sites with the same name claim to be this place, one in China and the other in Afghanistan). The group undoubtedly reached their destination because it is mentioned in Chinese sources. In the same register, another group must be mentioned, which was organised by a Chinese emperor who, at a date we are not sure of, sent around one hundred warriors to the West, which they never reached.

7. A Roman adventure: the use of garum *and, more generally, fish sauces*

From that point onwards, both India and China were trade destinations for the Greeks and Romans. Trade became increasingly sea-based, from one continent to another and, regardless of what their rulers thought, the Romans found this situation perfectly normal. It put Rome at the centre of what we can call a largely globalised area. Furthermore, their everyday food shows this, with the use of *garum*, a fish sauce, certainly from the Far East. This was foreign to Rome, but it is clear that it was very important.

In fact, *garum* is the auto-digestion of fish by the diastases of the fish's own digestive tract, with an antiseptic (salt), which prevents putrefaction, while fermentation occurs causing the product to “mature”.

Romans loved it and used it a lot in their food.

> *“Patina of sole: beat the sole, prepare and place them in a shallow sauce pan. Add oil, broth and wine, and poach them thus. Now crush pepper, lovage and oregano and add of the fish juice. Then bind*

the sauce with raw egg yolks to make a good creamy sauce. Strain this over the soles, heat on a slow fire to fill it with live heat. Sprinkle with pepper and serve."

Apicius, *De re coquinaria*, 155, translation M. Hill, 1936.

8. Rome, faced with India's entry into the game, mainly during the imperial era

But where did it come from?

The origin is probably Phoenician and we will add that the Phoenicians probably imported know-how from the Far East, as shown elsewhere by P. Grimal and Th. Monod. We will also say that, although tenuous on this point, the distant routes were never abandoned and this situation was desired by the gods who had made Rome the *caput mundi*. In other words, and simply from a commercial point of view, Rome had goods from every category and from different horizons, which justified Pliny the Elder's proud satisfaction, regardless of what he thought of the imports of silk. In short, in Rome you could find anything.

If we examine the problem presented, not by the products of trade but the routes, there is barely any doubt that maritime access to India and to China put Roman trade on a level hitherto unseen, and that this only really became effective – by which we mean established on a firm footing – from the Roman conquest of Egypt. But the adventure had begun earlier, although sources do not agree on the use of monsoon or the name of its discoverer. In around 116 BC, a Greek sailor under service of the Ptolemaic dynasty, Eudoxus of Cyzicus, discovered the road to India, and probably the monsoon, perhaps preceded by or accompanied in this discovery by Hippalus, whose existence is inadequately dated and even contested. The Roman conquest of Egypt, shortly before our era, accelerated the movement, just like the transformation of the region of the Nabataeans, under Pompey, into the client kingdom of Rome, which was finally annexed by Trajan. This was the time of the economical take-off, as defined by D. Whittaker, with a movement towards India involving, according to Strabo, one hundred and twenty ships per year departing for Myos Hormos. We know that this traffic was under surveillance because these boats travelled with archers on-board, in charge of warding off any pirates. At this time, the to-ing and fro-ing, to the rhythm of the monsoon, became very large-scale and can be appreciated in many complementary ways, thanks to Greek, Latin, Indian or Chinese sources.

A number of ports of India are mentioned by the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (perhaps from the middle of the 1st century BC), one of the most important being *Muziris*, known by the *Tabula Peutingeriana,* long regarded in the contemporary period, rightly or wrongly, as Cranganore (Kerala). The site of Arikamedu, four kilometres south of Pondicherry, can be added, along with Sopatma, Poduke or Kamara which show that the east coast of India was visited. In addition, the Tamil poems of Sangam, from the Roman imperial period, mention the ships "of the Yavana (the Greeks) laden with gold splashing white foam over the waters of Periyar (province of Kerala) and returning full of pepper" and pearls. In Rome, pepper – black gold – had gained an exceptional place (up to 4 kg in large feasts). It was the same for pearls,

as we can see in female representations in Roman Egypt, often in the form of pearl ear pendants.

> *"To those who are bound for India, Ocelis is the best place for embarkation. If the wind, called Hippalus, happens to be blowing, it is possible to arrive in forty days at the nearest mart of India, Muziris by name. This, however, is not a very desirable place for disembarkation, on account of the pirates which frequent its vicinity, where they occupy a place called Nitrias; nor, in fact, is it very rich in articles of merchandise. Another port, and a much more convenient one, is that which lies in the territory of the people called Neacyndi, Barace by name..."*
>
> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, VI, XXVI, 9, translation J. Bostock, H.T. Riley, 1855.

Likewise, inscriptions in honour of the god Pan are in the same vein. They were found in a grotto in the Egyptian desert, close to Wadi Menih, with, for example, this signature dated 2 BC by C. Numidius Eros, a freedman linked to a family from Campania, who was returning from India, monitoring the import movement with his own slave. The low-level participants in this trade could therefore be freedmen or be slaves, as shown by numerous inscriptions in the same place. This all corresponds to a description by Pliny the Elder, largely confirmed by a papyrus, which indicates that in Egypt, this traffic which left from Alexandria, first took place on the river, then on the land, and then on the sea; it passed via *Coptos* before reaching the Red Sea at Berenice, which at the time was vigorously competing with, or even replacing Myos Hormos.

> *"Two miles distant from Alexandria is the town of Juliopolis. The distance thence to Coptos, up the Nile, is three hundred and eight miles; the voyage is performed, when the Etesian winds are blowing, in twelve days. From Coptos the journey is made with the aid of camels, stations being arranged at intervals for the supply of fresh water [...]. After leaving it we come to the city of Berenice, situated upon a harbour of the Red Sea, and distant from Coptos two hundred and fifty-seven miles. The greater part of this distance is generally travelled by night, on account of the extreme heat, the day being spent at the stations; in consequence of which it takes twelve days to perform the whole journey from Coptos to Berenice."*
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> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History,* VI, XXVI, 7-8, translation J. Bostock, H.T. Riley, 1855.

9. China again and again

Although an inscription from a Roman ship has been round in India in Alagankulam, the Romans may not themselves have navigated on the Indian Ocean, but they certainly knew how to use it and did so with large ships, as the perils of the sea could be unpredictable. One such example is the drifting, under Claudius, of a freedman of Annius Plocamus to Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon). There he discovered a land rich in gold, silver and precious stones, where tigers were hunted and a childless king was elected to avoid the bothers of a dynasty. He returned to Rome and subsequently diplomatic relations were forged with this region and Mediterranean coral was able to find an exceptional Indian opening. As for evolution in

knowledge on the Far East, it can be summarised by the fact that Strabo, close to our era, positioned India at the end of the world, whereas later, Claudius Ptolemy (*ca*. 100-180 AD) knew about other lands further to the south and the south-east, albeit poorly.

Despite excessive use of pepper in Rome, India could not replace China, the imported products of which, starting with silk, remained key to Roman concerns. Roman demand subsequently became more particular. Proof is provided by the fact that the Romans knew how to surpass *parfilage*, so that real silk garments finally made their appearance. This was the 3rd century AD, a period in which silk yarn and raw silk was just beginning to be imported, instead of fabrics containing silk yarn. Previously, from 160 AD, the maritime route had grown in importance, probably due to difficulties encountered on land routes. Chinese silk arrived from the Strait of Malacca to the Ganges, and then took a land route to the western coast of India before reaching the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf. The Da Qin (Roman Empire) was very close, according to the optimistic vision of some Chinese sources, notably the *Shuijingzhu*.

India and China were therefore still at the centre of Roman preoccupations in the imperial period. Although there were highs and lows, the movement towards silk never stopped because, much later, Dioclatian was "seeking clothes embroidered in gold and ...wanting the radiance of silk for his feet", which Aurelius Victor qualified as "excessive luxury for a Roman citizen", "the mark of a soul swollen with pride". At a much later date (408 AD), it is reported that part of the ransom of Rome was largely paid to Alaric... in pepper, most certainly of Indian origin.

Seen from Rome, India and China constituted a New World or at least another world. One thing was sure : it could not be ignored.

This is why the apostle Thomas set off to evangelise India, probably from 52 AD.

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