



SILK ROAD
VIRTUAL MUSEUM

THE QUEST TO CONNECT THE GREATEST EMPIRES OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

by Richard Griffiths

Silk Road Diplomats - Part 2



THIS IS A PUBLICATION BY THE SILK ROAD VIRTUAL MUSEUM

The Silk Road Virtual Museum is an ambitious and innovative online project that brings the history and cultural heritage of the ancient Silk Road to life for a global audience. Conceived by retired Economic Historian Professor Richard Griffiths (to the right), the museum provides a dynamic, interactive experience where visitors can explore artefacts and e-library resources across different exhibits, covering key periods of the Silk Road's history between 600-900 CE and 1200-1500 CE.

The museum leverages cutting-edge virtual technology, allowing users to navigate an interactive map interface that spans the diverse civilizations along these ancient trade corridors, from China to the Middle East and beyond. Far more than a digital archive, the museum is driven by a deep passion to challenge Western-centric perspectives and foster greater cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Griffiths and his team aim to nuance historical narratives and highlight the rich cultural exchanges that shaped the world long before European colonial powers arrived.

With plans for future expansion, including an underwater component featuring shipwreck artefacts, the Silk Road Virtual Museum is a constantly evolving platform that preserves and shares the remarkable legacy of this vital trade network. By making this cultural heritage freely accessible online, Griffiths hopes to inspire curiosity, learning, and a more holistic understanding of humanity's shared past.

[VISIT THE MUSEUM AT SILKROADVIRTUALMUSEUM.COM](http://SILKROADVIRTUALMUSEUM.COM)



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EAST MEETS WEST —ALMOST

Historians have long debated whether the term 'Silk Road' is a fitting description for the network of trade routes that spanned the Eurasian continent. Valerie Hansen argued that the Silk Road might not be considered significant if measured solely by the volume of goods transported, the frequency of traffic, or the number of travellers at any given time.



While it's true that the scale of trade along these routes may not have been as extensive as once believed, by the end of the first century BCE, Chinese silk had already made a notable impact in Rome.

The Roman poet Virgil (70–19 BCE) referenced silk in his works, associating it with the opulent luxuries of the East.

Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE), the Roman historian, described silk as a highly coveted and costly material imported from the enigmatic land of 'Serica'.

Meanwhile, the philosopher and statesman Seneca the Younger (c. 4 BCE – 65 CE) lamented the growing fashion

for silk, criticising it for being so thin and delicate that it barely concealed the body, making women appear almost naked despite being clothed.

It is evident that the two great empires at either end of the Silk Road were aware of each other's existence, yet significant obstacles prevented direct contact. Distance was a major factor. A straight line from the Han capital of Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an) to Antioch on the Mediterranean coast measures approximately 6,461 km. However, a UNESCO study estimated that the shortest practical route would span around 7,250 km.



GAN YING'S JOURNEY TO THE EDGES OF THE KNOWN WORLD

The Later Han Dynasty, an era characterised by both consolidation and expansion, was driven by a desire to extend its influence and broaden its understanding of the world beyond its borders. This ambition culminated in 97 CE with the diplomatic mission of Gan Ying, to reach the far-off Roman Empire, referred to in China as "Da Qin."

Although Gan Ying never reached Roman territory, his journey illuminated the challenges of ancient travel, the allure of distant lands, and the intricate network of connections that made up the Silk Road.

EMBARKING ON THE UNKNOWN

The mission began under the directive of General Ban Chao, who had successfully secured the Western Regions (modern-day Xinjiang and Central Asia) for the Han Dynasty. With an eye on expanding Han influence even further west, Ban Chao entrusted Gan Ying with a mission of great importance: to establish contact with the Roman Empire and form an alliance to counter the power of the Parthian Empire, the formidable force that dominated the lands between China and Rome.

Gan Ying's journey, likely accompanied by a contingent of 50 to 100 men, began

in the familiar territories of the Western Regions. Soon, however, he ventured into lands rarely seen by Han envoys.

His route took him across the towering Pamir Mountains, through vast, arid deserts, and deep into the heart of the Parthian Empire. The expedition was not only physically gruelling but also a test of endurance, diplomacy, and survival in unfamiliar and often hostile environments.

As Gan Ying pressed deeper into Central Asia, he meticulously recorded his observations, offering a vivid portrayal of a world teeming with diversity and complexity.

He described bustling markets brimming with goods from across the known world, the advanced agricultural techniques of Central Asian states, and the thriving urban centres that dotted the landscape.

Upon his return, these detailed accounts provided the Han court with a rare



Detail from fresco from Luoyang Tomb

glimpse into the economic and cultural richness that lay beyond their borders.

His insights into the Parthian Empire proved particularly valuable, highlighting the Parthians' strategic position as intermediaries in trade between East and West and their control over the flow of goods along the Silk Road.

These observations underscored the Parthians' significant influence and shaped Han diplomatic strategies for years to come.

THE TURNING POINT AT THE PERSIAN GULF

After months of arduous travel, Gan Ying finally reached the Persian Gulf, the threshold of the unknown. Here, he encountered sailors and traders who regaled him with ominous tales of the dangers that awaited those venturing further west.

They spoke of vast, treacherous seas, hostile climates, and a journey that could stretch on for months—possibly even a year.

Faced with such daunting prospects, combined with his limited resources and knowledge, Gan Ying made a pivotal decision: he would turn back. As a result, he never reached the shores of the Roman Empire.

This decision remains curious. After all, having travelled overland to Persia, Gan Ying was less than 800 kilometres (in a direct line) from the nearest Roman outpost at Dura-Europos, located on the western bank of the Euphrates River. Although the terrain would have

been challenging, the journey likely would have followed established trade routes—the same routes that carried Persian goods inland to markets in the north and west.

However, the Parthians, who held a dominant position in the region, had every reason not to facilitate such a journey, particularly if they had learned that Gan Ying's objective was to forge an alliance between China and Rome.

Whatever the reason, and the Hou Hanshu (Book of the Later Han) does not provide an explanation, Gan Ying ultimately decided against the overland route. Instead, he opted for a maritime alternative, only to be dissuaded by local sailors.

According to the Hou Hanshu, they warned him: "The sea is vast and broad; with favourable winds, it is possible to cross within three months, but if the winds are unfavourable, it can take up to two years. People often die at sea, and thus many who attempt the journey perish."

This dire warning contrasts with the fact that the Romans regularly operated a fleet of 120 vessels that sailed annually from the Red Sea ports of Berenike and Myos Hormos to Arabia, India, and Africa. Most of these ships would have followed coastal routes, avoiding the need to cross the "vast and broad" open ocean. Therefore, it is possible that Gan Ying was either deliberately misinformed by the Parthians or misled due to poor translation.

Rather than risk the lives of his men and the success of his mission on an uncertain sea voyage, Gan Ying chose

to return to the Han court. Along the way, he continued to gather valuable information from the people he encountered, bringing back knowledge that would enrich the understanding of distant lands at the Han court, even if he never fulfilled his original mission.

SUCCESS IN FAILURE

Gan Ying's return to the Han court, though marked by the incompleteness of his mission, sparked considerable interest and excitement. While he never made contact with the Roman Empire, the wealth of information he gathered along his journey proved invaluable to the Han Dynasty.

His detailed accounts of the Parthian Empire and the various lands he traversed provided the court with crucial intelligence about the vast regions

beyond China's borders. In addition, his second-hand descriptions of Rome, depicting a distant and majestic civilisation, captivated the imagination of the Han rulers.

The significance of Gan Ying's mission lay not in its final destination but in the insights it offered into the vast, interconnected world of the Silk Road. His journey embodied the spirit of curiosity and the relentless pursuit of knowledge that defined the Han Dynasty's approach to foreign policy.

Gan Ying's experience, though falling short of its intended goal, ultimately succeeded in expanding the Han Empire's understanding of the world, highlighting the value of exploration even in the face of challenges and setbacks.



Temple of Bel at Dura-Europos

THE DIPLOMATIC MISSION MARCUS AURELIUS TO CH

In October 166 CE, a delegation, apparently sent by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, arrived at the Han Dynasty court. This event marked one of the earliest documented instances of direct contact between two of the most powerful empires of the ancient world, positioned at opposite ends of the vast Eurasian continent.

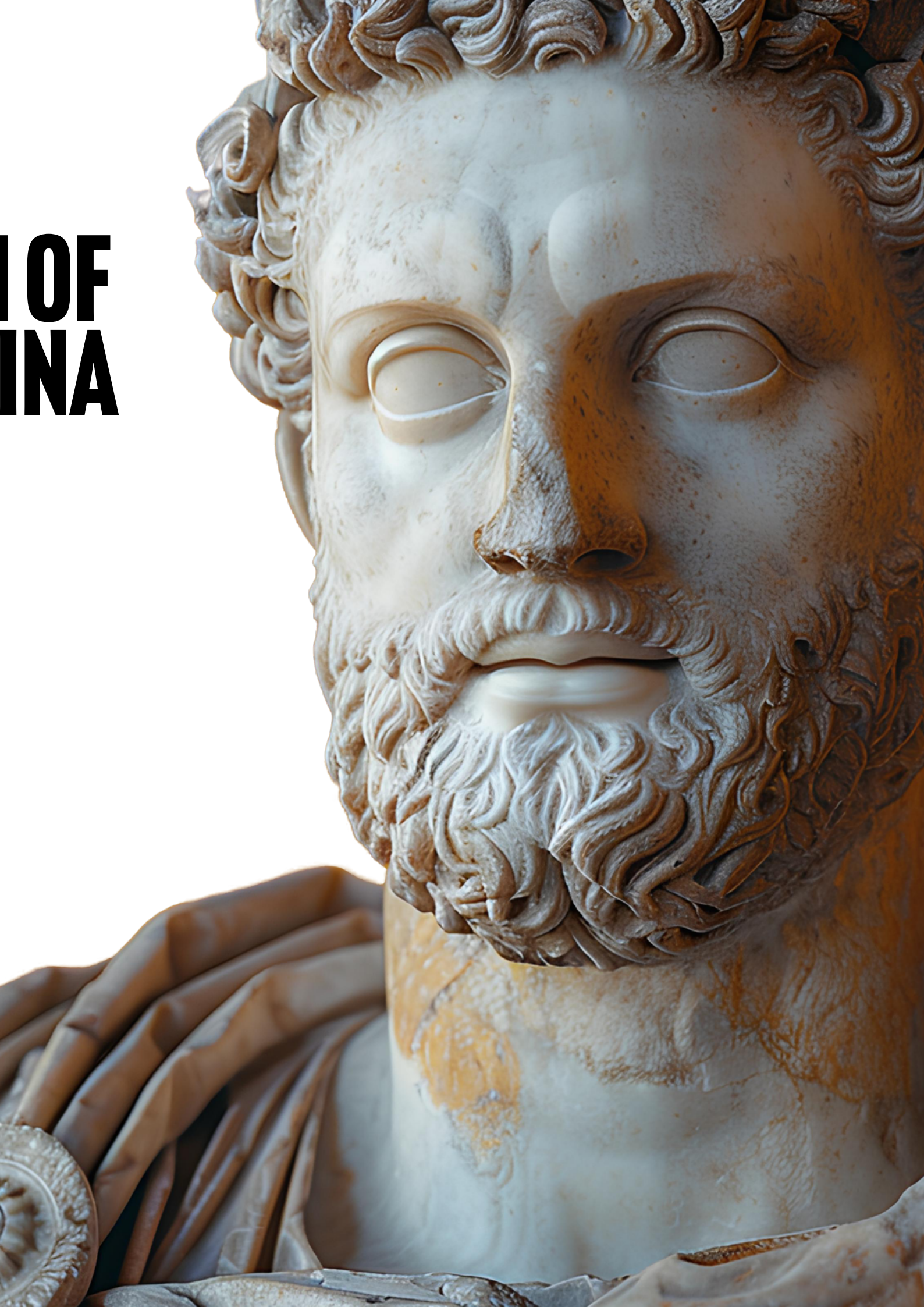
Marcus Aurelius, renowned as one of the “Five Good Emperors,” ruled Rome from 161 to 180 CE, a period remembered for its philosophical depth and military challenges, alongside relative peace and stability. Under his rule, the Roman Empire was actively engaged in trade and diplomacy, extending its influence to distant lands, including the formidable kingdoms and empires of the East.

During this time, China, under the Han Dynasty, also enjoyed a period of strength and prosperity. The Han Empire stood as a dominant power in East Asia, with its influence extending along the Silk Road, connecting it to distant lands across the Eurasian continent.

The Han rulers were well aware of these far-off territories, referring to the Roman Empire as “Da Qin” (大秦), or ‘Great Qin.’ This name not only acknowledged Rome’s grandeur but also



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linked it to China's own Qin Dynasty, the empire's founding dynasty. The choice of this term highlights that China viewed Rome as a powerful and civilised state, on par with its own empire in terms of influence and prestige.

THE ROMAN DELEGATION

Facilitated by intermediaries such as the Parthians and the Kushans, trade between the Roman Empire and China had been ongoing for some time, though direct diplomatic contact remained rare. Then, unexpectedly, a Roman embassy arrived at the Han court in 166 CE, seeking to establish direct relations.

This significant event was recorded in Chinese sources, most notably in the Book of the Later Han (后汉书), one of the period's key historical texts. According to these records, the Roman mission was led by envoys who claimed to represent the Emperor of Rome, whom they referred to as "An Dun" (安敦), a transliteration of Antoninus.

The Chinese chroniclers described the Roman envoys as tall with deep-set eyes, features that distinguished them from the peoples of Central Asia and added to the mystique surrounding them.

The Roman envoys brought gifts of ivory, rhinoceros horn, and tortoiseshell—luxurious and exotic items highly prized in China. These offerings were seen as symbols of the wealth and allure of the distant Western world, adding to the fascination that China had with the Roman Empire. However, not everyone at the Han court was convinced.

Some officials expressed scepticism, questioning the authenticity of the delegation. They argued that diplomatic exchanges between great emperors typically involved rare and unique items—precious metals, exquisite textiles, or even exotic animals—that showcased the finest craftsmanship and artistry of the sending empire. In contrast, the gifts brought by the Roman envoys, while valuable, could have been acquired by anyone with sufficient wealth.

This scepticism raised doubts about the true nature of the delegation. It was not uncommon for merchants to attach themselves to official missions, using the opportunity to secure lucrative deals while enjoying the benefits of diplomatic hospitality.

Unfortunately, the historical record does not elaborate on what followed, leaving the fate of this Roman mission shrouded in mystery.

SPECULATION ABOUT THE ENVOYS AND THEIR JOURNEY

There is no reason to doubt that a group from the West, claiming to be Roman envoys, arrived in Luoyang, the Han capital. However, the sole mention of this event appears in a Chinese source, with no corresponding record in Roman texts. This absence of evidence does not necessarily discredit the event. After all, not everything was recorded in Roman history, and much of what was documented has been lost to time.

It is also possible that the envoys were not dispatched directly by Emperor



*Bust of Marcus Aurelius,
Musée Saint-Raymond, Toulouse, France*

Marcus Aurelius. Just as Gan Ying's mission to the West was initiated by a regional governor rather than the Han Emperor himself, this delegation might have been similarly organised at a local level.

Given that Rome had a garrison and trading hub located 800 kilometres east of the Mediterranean, it is plausible that the mission originated from this area, rather than the distant imperial capital. Moreover, it is important to remember that the Roman Empire was a vast, multicultural entity. A delegation from its eastern provinces would likely have been a diverse group, composed of individuals from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The "Romans" who arrived at the Han court may not have matched the familiar image of Roman soldiers or officials, but instead

reflected the Empire's cosmopolitan nature.

This diversity might also explain how the envoys communicated with the Han court. If members of the delegation had experience trading with the Parthians, they might have spoken local languages, facilitating communication with Chinese merchants and interpreters who were accustomed to dealing with Central Asian traders.

In this context, the diplomatic exchange would have been shaped by the interconnectedness of the Silk Road, where multiple cultures, languages, and people met and interacted across vast distances.

In the previous story, we saw that Gan Ying made his journey entirely overland, choosing to avoid the perilous seas he had heard so much about. But unlike Gan Ying, the Roman travellers who arrived in China had taken the sea route.

They entered China from the "Western Sea" (the Indian Ocean), docking at the port of Rinan (日南), in what is now central/southern Vietnam, which was under Chinese rule at the time. If these travellers had indeed set sail from within the Roman Empire, their journey likely began on Roman vessels departing from Red Sea ports, or perhaps on Arab ships leaving from ports in the Persian Gulf. Their voyage would have been timed to make use of the prevailing trade winds, but it remains uncertain whether they crossed the ocean directly to north-western India or hugged the coastline instead.

Upon reaching Sri Lanka, the Roman travellers may have switched to different

ships to continue their journey to Southeast Asia. Alternatively, it's possible that the "envoys" began their journey by sea from Sri Lanka itself, which would explain the prevalence of Indian-sourced goods among their diplomatic offerings.

THE IMPACT OF THE MISSION

The Roman embassy of 166 AD did not establish a lasting diplomatic relationship between Rome and China. The sheer distance and the challenges of travel made regular contact impractical, and both empires were facing significant internal and external pressures.

In the later years of Marcus Aurelius's rule, Rome was embroiled in military conflicts on its northern frontiers and devastated by a plague that ravaged the empire.

Meanwhile, the Han Dynasty in China was showing signs of decline, and within a few decades, it would collapse, plunging the region into a period of fragmentation and instability.

Though the mission did not lead to sustained diplomacy, it underscores the far-reaching trade networks that connected East and West. More importantly, it reveals the mutual curiosity and respect between the Roman and Chinese civilizations, two of the most powerful empires of the ancient world, even if their direct interactions were rare.



Detail of fresco. Chinese officials. Dahuting Tomb, Henan province, China (first century CE)

UNSEEN CONNECTIONS OF THE SILK ROAD

Gan Ying's journey to the western edges of the known world and the Roman envoys' approach from the east represent two sides of the same historical coin. Both missions, though separated by vast distances, cultural divides, and political boundaries, were driven by a shared ambition: to bridge the expansive gap between the two greatest empires of their era.

Yet, despite their efforts, neither side fully achieved direct contact. Instead, their journeys reveal the formidable challenges of ancient diplomacy, where the physical obstacles of mountains, deserts, and seas were paralleled by the political and cultural barriers erected by those who controlled the routes between East and West. These missions underscore the critical role of intermediaries, like the Parthians, who controlled the flow of goods and information along the Silk Road.

Positioned strategically between Rome and China, the Parthians had every incentive to keep the two empires

apart, ensuring their own profitability as middlemen in the trade of silk, spices, and luxury goods.

Both Gan Ying and the Roman envoys remind us that the Silk Road was not merely a highway for the exchange of goods, but a complex web of interactions where information, culture, and diplomacy played roles as crucial as the trade in silk.

The missions of Gan Ying and the Roman envoys highlight the limitations of ancient diplomacy, where success was often measured not by reaching the intended destination, but by the knowledge and connections made along the way.

In the end, while the direct meeting of East and West remained elusive, the efforts of these early diplomats laid the groundwork for future exchanges. Their journeys, marked by challenges and setbacks, were the first steps in a long process of building understanding across continents—an endeavour that would continue for centuries along the storied routes of the Silk Road.



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