

The Origins of Roman Li-chien

In the West, children are generally taught that the first European to arrive in China is Marco Polo, who spent nearly two decades traveling throughout the East in the latter half of the thirteenth century. Contrary to this popular belief, Polo is only one in a long line of European merchants to take either sea or overland routes via the Silk Road. In A.D. 226, a Roman merchant is reported to have arrived in South China. Sixty years prior, a traveler arrived in the court of the Han Dynasty from the land the Chinese called Ta-ts'in—The Roman Empire. This traveler claimed to have been an embassy sent from its king, An-dun, which is the transliteration of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. The “ambassador's” claim of official imperial representation is of dubious authenticity; most modern scholars consider him to be an enterprising merchant, claiming a direct connection with Marcus Aurelius to further his own economic goals in the Han Court. Nonetheless, this is the earliest literary record of Romans arriving in the Far East according to the *History of the Later Han Dynasty*, the Han's official annals from this era.¹

While the Chinese unsuccessfully sent a diplomatic envoy to Rome in A.D. 97, the contacts initiated by the Romans were exclusively of commercial interest.² In both classical and eastern sources, there is no mention of a direct military contact between the two distant, but greatly influential ancient superpowers. There is, however, considerable circumstantial evidence

¹ Corroborated in F. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient* (New York: Paragon, 1966), 176; Ying-shih Yü, *Trade and Expansion in Han China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 160; Homer H. Dubs, *A Roman City in Ancient China* (London: The China Society, 1957), 2.

² The Romans relied more on goods from China than the reverse, which is why the Chinese were less concerned with sending merchants to Rome, although they still understood the great wealth and influence wielded by the Rome. It is for this reason that the Han Court sent an official diplomatic embassy led by Kan Ying to Rome in A.D. 97. He made it as far as Parthia before returning to China after hearing a fib concocted by the Nabataeans that it would take an additional two years to sail to Rome from the eastern Mediterranean. The Nabataeans had much to gain from barring a direct relationship between Rome and China, for they were charging tariffs as great as twenty-five percent on all incoming goods along the Silk Road. Yü, *op. cit.*, 156-159.

that Roman legionaries may have arrived in Western China nearly two centuries prior to the arrival of the Roman merchant in the Han Court in 166. In 1957, Oxford sinologist Homer H. Dubs published *A Roman City in Ancient China*, a meticulously researched paper that had been based on a lecture delivered to The China Society in 1955. In its final form, *A Roman City in Ancient China* represented a culmination of more than a decade of research by the eminent historian, who also had a strong background in the classics. Highly controversial in its day, the conclusion of Dubs' research is corroborated with the traditions of the inhabitants of Zhelai, a small village in the western Chinese province of Gansu. The inhabitants are not ethnically Chinese and go so far as to claim direct lineage to Rome. It is believed that the ancient name for this village is Li-chien, which is not only a foreign name, but a word that the Chinese used for the most ancient name of the Roman Empire.³ In his research, Dubs charts a course in the development of Li-chien as a Roman city.

The Theory

Out of the 1,587 cities and counties listed in the cadastral register in A.D. 5, only three were named for foreigners. Located in Chinese Turkestan, Kucha and Wen-siu were populated by immigrants from outside China.⁴ The third city, Li-chien, carried the transliteration of the Egyptian city of Alexandria, a word which came to represent the whole of the Roman Empire.⁵

³ Dubs, *op. cit.*, 1.

⁴ Peter A. Boodberg, "Two Notes on the History of the Chinese Frontier" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 1, no. 3/4 (Nov., 1936): 286-291.

⁵ Dubs, *op. cit.*, 1, 24-25. Dubs states that the "various orthographies for 'Li-chien' indicate that this name was a transliteration of some foreign word that could not be represented exactly in Chinese." Hirth writes it as "Li-k'an" and takes this to represent Petra; *op. cit.*, 77. Tarn adopts this orthography, but believes it refers to Media; W. W. Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria & India* (1938; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 347.

Li-chien was located in the northwestern extension of Gansu province and had been conquered by the Chinese from the Hsiung-nu—known in European history as the Huns—in 121 B.C., with most of its inhabitants either forced to migrate westward or be resettled and integrated by the Chinese into other parts of the empire. The argument that Li-chien is of foreign origin is further bolstered by its renaming in A.D. 9 by a Confucian usurper to the throne, Wang Mang. Adopting the Confucian doctrine of “rectifying names,” in which cities were given more representative descriptors, Li-chien thusly became Jie-lu, which can be translated in two ways: “caitiffs raised up” and “caitiffs [captured] storming [a city]”.⁶

It would appear curious how a term representing Alexandria would come to represent the Rome Empire as a whole, but in the *History of the Later Han Dynasty*, the statement is made that “the country of Ta-ts'in is also called Li-chien.” This statement appears in several other accounts, so Dubs asserts that there is little reason to doubt it. Ta-ts'in was the name for the Roman Empire as late as the middle ages and as early as A.D. 166 when the merchant claiming a diplomatic connection to Marcus Aurelius arrived in the Han Court.⁷ Since it has been established that Ta-ts'in and Li-chien represent the same geographical and political entity to the Chinese, it must now be explained how a village in western Han China came to be called “Rome” in Chinese—or, at the very least, Alexandria.

The explanation would take us back to the last gasping breaths of the Roman Republic. In June of 53 B.C., Marcus Licinius Crassus led some forty thousand soldiers to one of the

J. J. M. de Groot believes Li-k'an represents Hyrcania; *Chinesische Urkunden zur Geschichte Asiens*, 2: 18. Boodberg accepts the pronunciation of Li-chien over Li-k'an, but places it in one of the several Alexandrias in Central Asia; *op. cit.*, 290. P. Pelliot understands Li-chien to denote the Alexandria of Egypt because jugglers arrived in China as a gift from the Parthians from this place; *T'oung Pao* 16 (1915), 690-91. Dubs accepts Pelliot's interpretation.

⁶ Dubs, *op. cit.*, 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

greatest military disasters in Roman history on the dusty plains of Carrhae (near modern Harran, Turkey), in northern Mesopotamia. Of the forty thousand: half perished, one-quarter were captured, and the remainder escaped into the desert. Crassus, with Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar, formed the First Triumvirate, and he had been the chief financier of his partners. He desired what Caesar and Pompey had been able to accomplish but he had not throughout his career—unparalleled *dignitas* and *auctoritas* among the ruling Roman elite through military glory. At age 60, he was keenly aware that he had little time to accomplish his goals; he hastily planned a conquest that he hoped would surpass even Pompey's campaigns in the East or Caesar's victories in Gaul, but his ambition would ultimately lead him to destruction.⁸

Crassus was unequivocally outmatched by his Parthian adversaries. The Roman *testudo* offered little protection from the heavily armored cataphracts and the rain of arrows from the Parthian horse archers. Like half of his army, he would not live to see the next day. The ten thousand legionaries captured by the Parthians would begin a long and arduous journey that most historians could only speculate about. According to Pliny, the captives were marched 1,500 miles to Margiana to guard the eastern border of the Parthian Empire, probably to construct fortifications at Merv.⁹ Horace speculated that the captives were integrated into the Parthian army and intermarried with the indigenous women where they were settled.¹⁰ Apart from the brief mentions of the fate of Crassus' remaining army by Pliny and Horace, there is no archaeological evidence to corroborate the claims. Assuming that the two historians are correct,

⁸ Allen Mason Ward, *Marcus Crassus and the Late Roman Republic* (Columbia; London: University of Missouri Press, 1977), 281.

⁹ Pliny, *Natural History* VI, 47; Raschke states that modern scholars have speculated that the captives worked on fortifications at Merv. Manfred G. Raschke, "New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East" *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II 9.2 (1978): 681.

¹⁰ Horace, *Odes* III, 5, 5.

it is also impossible to know how many of the legionaries survived the long march, but since they were battle-hardened veterans and undoubtedly very tough men, it would be conceivable that at least some of the ten thousand survived the journey.¹¹ At this point in Dubs' theory, attention must now be shifted eastward approximately five hundred miles, to the region east of the River Oxus.

Meanwhile in Central Asia, the Huns—who had previously enjoyed more than a century of relative political stability—fractured into two divisions by 58 B.C. The ruler, or *shan-yü*, of the eastern portion of the empire was Hou-han-sie, who had garnered the support of a convocation of the region's nobility, and thus Dubs presumes him to be the legal ruler of the empire. The western half of Hun territory was governed by Jzh-jzh, Hou-han-sie's older brother. Jzh-jzh was the militarily superior of the two and defeated Hou-han-sie in battle, who was forced to seek protection from China. The Han Court, eager to end the Hun raids into their frontier, which had claimed countless wealth and lives, in terms of both casualties and captives sold by the Huns into slavery, bestowed the *shan-yü* with grain and other presents.¹² Hou-han-sie was given great status in the court due to the always-popular Han policy of “using barbarians to fight barbarians” in times of civil war.¹³ In addition, he was also allowed to occupy certain outlying

¹¹ It is also important to note that when peace was negotiated in 20 B.C. between Augustus and the Parthian king Phraates IV, and the standards of Crassus and Antony were returned in exchange for the king's son who was being held hostage, the Parthians also returned prisoners from previous Roman military campaigns. It is uncertain as to how many of these prisoners were veterans of Carrhae since youngest would be in their early fifties at this point, and it is also uncertain from wherein Parthian territory they came. George Rawlinson, *The Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy; or the Geography, History, & Antiquities of Parthia* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co.; New York: Scribner, Welford, and Armstrong, 1873): 209.

¹² Dubs, *op. cit.*, 5-6; Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 60-64.

¹³ Barfield, *op. cit.*, 63.

forts in the Chinese frontier in the west and north bordering Mongolia.¹⁴

While the confrontation between China and Hou-han-sie's eastern portion of the Hun empire had settled, the instability of Jzh-jzh continued to grow. He sought to ally himself with the Wu-sun to the west, but they had already allied with China and promptly executed Jzh-jzh's embassy. Jzh-jzh moved westward out of Mongolia and warred with the local inhabitants, including the Wu-sun, whom he defeated but did not conquer. Westward still lay Sogdiana, between the Oxus and Jaxartes rivers, an enemy of the Wu-sun. The king of Sogdiana invited him and his followers to settle on the eastern frontier of his territory to ward against further Wu-sun attacks. A firm alliance was made, with both rulers exchanging daughters in marriage. Thereupon, Jzh-jzh, with Sogdian troops, raided deep into Wu-sun territory, killing and enslaving many. He also drove off the Wu-sun's sheep and cattle, forcing them to retreat to the east 300 miles.¹⁵

Soon after his victory, Jzh-jzh became proud and quarreled with his ally, executing the Sogdian king's daughter and several hundred of his men. Jzh-jzh proceeded to settle in the Talas River valley, fortifying his capital between the Jaxartes and Lake Balkhash. He then exacted annual tribute from the surrounding Aorsi people as well as Ferghana.¹⁶

The Chinese had a vested interest in the Talas River region since the Silk Road ran through the area. The rogue *shan-yü's* actions were threatening the stability of the trade route, so the Han court dispatched an embassy led by Gu Ji in January of 42 B.C. Jzh-jzh's grandest miscalculation came when he executed the entire envoy and then refused to return their corpses

¹⁴ Dubs, *op. cit.*, 6.

¹⁵ Dubs, *op. cit.*, 6-7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

to the Chinese. Then in 38 B.C., the Chinese mobilized a force of 40,000 well-trained men led by Gan Yen-shou and Ch'en T'ang to quell the situation in the west.¹⁷

The Chinese gained a decisive victory, sacking the fortified town in 35 B.C.; the Hun warlord was executed for his resistance. The events of the battle were recorded in two ways: an illustration of the battle was painted on the east wall of the funeral chamber of Hsiao-t'ang-shan dating to before A.D. 129 and a written description of the battle is recorded in eight scenes in the biography of the general Ch'en T'ang; it is believed that the painting predates the written testament.¹⁸

The description of the battle contains several peculiar phrases that leads Dubs to believe a foreign, distinctly non-Hun influence in the battle. The first such phrase is from the first written scene, taken from the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*: “More than a hundred foot-soldiers, lined up on either side of the gate in a fish-scale formation, were practicing military drill.” The second phrase of interest states that “outside the earthen wall was a double palisade of wood. From behind the palisade [people] shot and killed many of those outside [the city]. So those outside brought out firewood and set fire to the wooden wall.” The mention of the “fish-scale formation” and “double palisade” together lead Dubs to conclude for a variety of reasons that not only are the “more than a hundred” foot-soldiers outside the gate not of Hunnish origin, but indeed foot-soldiers of Roman descent.¹⁹ Dubs dismisses the probability that this formation was composed of Hun warriors because “nomads and barbarians, like Gauls, rushed into battle in a confused mass. A well-patterned array in battle can be achieved only by men long trained as

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

¹⁸ J. J. L. Duyvendak, “An Illustrated Battle-Account in the History of the Former Han Dynasty” *T'oung Pao* 34, no. 4 (1939): 256-258. Dubs makes use of Duyvendak's translations and analyses; *op. cit.*, 31.

¹⁹ Dubs, *op. cit.*, 10-11.

professional soldiers.”²⁰ Additionally, the Huns, like the Parthians, relied heavily on mounted archers. A professional infantry force must have consisted of mercenaries as opposed to indigenous people.²¹

When Dubs first began his research into the origin of the soldiers depicted in the painting and biography in 1939, he had initially concluded that the foot-soldiers were of Sogdian origin—perhaps holdovers from the force that the king had donated to Jzh-jzh for the raids into Wu-sun territory. Dubs stated that the “fish-scale formation” was likely “a reference to the Greek practise of overlapping shields, which is called over-shielding. Such a battle-array would naturally attract the attention of the Chinese, to whom it was unfamiliar. The Sogdianians had probably learned it from the Greeks who had previously conquered them, especially because it had been so effective against them.”²² Two years later, Dubs—with the backing of his colleague W. W. Tarn—altered his analysis of the origin of the infantrymen.

Tarn reminded Dubs that Greek Bactria fell to the barbarians around 130 B.C., nearly a century before the sack of Jzh-jzh's capital. Tarn writes:

“I don't see how it is possible at that date for it (the fish-scale formation) to have anything to do with either the Macedonian phalanx or the Greek hoplite phalanx. It would have implied that the memory of the phalanx had lasted in Sogdiana for a century. . . . Any idea of the Greek phalanx seems to be quite impossible. The Macedonian phalanx carried small round shields. Men bearing them could hardly have crowded closely enough together to appear 'arrayed like fish-scales.’”²³

Tarn pointed out to Dubs that Roman legionaries were within walking distance of Jzh-

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

²¹ Homer H. Dubs, “An Ancient Military Contact Between Romans and Chinese” *The American Journal of Philology* 62, no. 3 (1941): 326.

²² From a letter written by Dubs to Duyvendak, printed in *T'oung Pao* 35, no. 1-3 (1939): 213-214.

²³ Dubs, *A Roman City in Ancient China*, 12-13.

jzh's territory, since Margiana was about four to five hundred miles to the west. Since Jzh-jzh's execution of the Sogdian princess had alienated the kingdom, Jzh-jzh naturally would have sought mercenaries from outside Sogdiana and Hunnish territory. Margiana was located along the trade route that also ran through Jzh-jzh's citadel in the Talas River valley, so his desire for troops would have reached the Roman exiles to his west who would certainly have been “attracted to a famous warrior who promised to become a rival of the hated Parthians.”²⁴ Having explained how Roman mercenaries may have crossed the Oxus, Dubs implies that the “fish-scale formation” could only have been a result of the Roman *testudo*, a typically Roman military formation. When the rectangular Roman *scuta* were held side by side by a row of soldiers, it would have appeared from the Chinese perspective to look like the scales of a fish.²⁵

The description of the double palisade would also serve as an integral piece of evidence for supposing there was a Roman presence in Central Asia. Tarn wrote Dubs that he “cannot remember ever having met, either in literature or archaeology, with any Greek town that had a palisade outside the wall. The rule of one wall and a ditch outside (or in a great fortress even three ditches) seems to have been absolute.” Dubs adds that “the 'double palisade of wood' seen in Sogdiana by the Chinese was then a standard feature in Roman fortifications, so that Jzh-jzh undoubtedly had Roman engineering assistance in building his town.”²⁶ What happened to these Romans following the battle is less clear.

In their report to the emperor, Gan Yen-shou and Ch'en T'ang stated that they had killed 1,518 people, accepted the surrender of more than a thousand, and taken alive 145 men. It would appear odd that the 145 men captured alive would be considered separate than the

²⁴ Dubs, “An Ancient Military Contact,” 326.

²⁵ Dubs, *A Roman City in Ancient China*, 13-14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

thousand troops who had surrendered, so Dubs presumes this 145 to be the “more than a hundred” infantrymen in the “fish-scale formation,” since they would have ceased to fight upon the death of their employer. Since the Chinese would have welcomed brave fighters to guard their frontier, it would be logical to suppose that the 145 soldiers captured may have freely gone with the Chinese since escape into the inhospitable desert would have meant certain death by starvation, for they were not nomads and would have been unable to care for themselves on the steppe. The Chinese would have settled these men in a frontier town, Li-chien, which carried the name from where the soldiers originated. The Chinese historians made no mention of this act because it would have been of little consequence to China. Hence, when Li-chien had its name changed temporarily to “caitiffs taken in storming a city,” it would strengthen the argument that the so-called Roman legionaries had been settled there following Jzh-jzh's sack in 35 B.C.²⁷ It is known that Li-chien existed until at least the eighth century, when the Tibetans overran the region, probably destroying it; one could conclude that the original inhabitants would have married Chinese women, which would explain how the town survived for centuries.

Since Dubs maintains that the Romans voluntarily gave themselves up to the Chinese, they would have been considered freemen and, consequently, would not have been expected to conform to Chinese society. Furthermore, the Chinese would have allowed Li-chien to be founded on the Roman political model, ostensibly constituting a Roman settlement that may be called a colony, thousands of miles to the east of the boundary of the Roman Empire.²⁸

Apart from the overt support of Sir William Tarn, Dubs' theory of the Roman city in ancient China gained acceptance in some surprising quarters, from both sinologists and

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

classicists. B. Szczesniak states that Dubs' "mastery of historical logic based on a vast knowledge of Roman and Chinese sources confirms the Roman origin of the city of Li-jien." He believes that the settlement continued to grow as more arrivals came to find their way into western China as a result of a series of Roman-Parthian wars that continued to occur during the Augustan era, corresponding to the wars of the usurper Emperor Wang Mang. Szczesniak doubts that such a village would have lasted into the eighth century without a continuously expanding population from the West.²⁹ H. H. Scullard also accepted the theory, noting it in *From the Gracchi to Nero*.³⁰ John Ferguson also readily accepted the circumstantial evidence that surrounded the capture of the "more than a hundred" mercenaries that were apparently from Margiana and their likening to the 145 men later captured and settled by the Chinese.³¹ Most recently, the theory was unabashedly accepted by Christian Tyler in *Wild West China: The Taming of Xinjiang* in 2004.³²

Despite receiving accolades from a number of accomplished historians in both eastern and classical history, there are a number of shortcomings in Dubs' theory, many of which were addressed in later reviews of the paper.

Problems

The majority of the historians who have tackled this subject decry Dubs' research on the grounds that he places his entire argument on evidence that is either circumstantial or indirect.

²⁹ B. Szczesniak, "Review: A Roman City in Ancient China" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 77, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1957): 286-287.

³⁰ H. H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero* (1959; reprint, London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 430.

³¹ John Ferguson, "China and Rome" *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II 9.2 (1978): 599-601.

³² Christian Tyler, *Wild West China: The Taming of Xinjiang* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 33-35.

Lattimore calls *A Roman City in Ancient China* “entertaining and convincing” but admits that western scholars have been obsessed with tracing connections between the West and China, adding that “details are piled up until they look mountainous, and the fact that they are after all rather trivial details is lost from sight.”³³ Lieberman follows, adding “the theory is very tempting and is presented so effectively with a wealth of evidence by so eminent an authority that one is so inclined to accept it” but expresses doubt to the theory's veracity based on the lack of literary evidence in the Chinese record for the origin of the 145 soldiers captured in the Talas valley. Furthermore, he points out that the authorities themselves disagree to the identification of the original Li-chien since it has been equated to Egyptian Alexandria, Petra, and Hyrcania.³⁴

Other historians have attacked Dubs' argument on logical grounds. Cammann suggests that the troops arranged in a “fish-scale formation” are not likely connected with the founding of Li-chien, “Alexandria at the borders of China.” Those where were seen practicing military drill near the palisade wall were more likely to be Asiatic troops, perhaps trained to fight by some Roman veterans. The Romans would likely have been too old to have fought the Chinese themselves, since by this time, most would have been in their 50's. He also maintains that Romans would not have named their city “Alexandria.” Macedonians and Hellenistic Greeks who came to Central Asia in the fourth century B.C. had a consistent habit of naming cities for their conqueror-hero, Alexander the Great; “Alexandria the Furthest,” or Alexandria Eschate was established on the road from Balkh to China. Cammann believes that Li-chien may have been founded by Greek or Greek-Bactrian merchants who sought to establish a trading post between Chinese Turkestan and China proper. He concedes that “however, this must remain mere

³³ Owen Lattimore, “Review: A Roman City in Ancient China” *The American Journal of Philology* 79, no. 4 (1958): 447-448.

³⁴ Samuel Lieberman, “Review: A Roman City in Ancient China” *Classical Philology* 53, no. 3 (Jul., 1958): 211.

conjecture unless archaeology can eventually throw some light on the former cultural relations of this city and its inhabitants.”³⁵

Ying-shih Yü also focuses primarily on the settlement of Li-chien and offers very convincing evidence for its non-Roman affiliation. Yü states that the settlement of 145 Roman legionaries in a city contradicts a whole set of institutional devices with which surrendered barbarians were normally handled by the Han government, as the ultimate goal of the Han provincial administration was to gradually assimilate surrendered non-Chinese citizens into Chinese society. One hundred forty-five Romans was too small of a number to be permitted to form a *hsien*, the standard Chinese province-district administrative system in which only more or less sinicized barbarians could be admitted, and there is no written evidence that Li-chien ever had an administrative structure other than the *hsien*. On these grounds, Yü summarily dismisses the Roman element of Li-chien.³⁶

Although the logical flaws in Dubs' argument that the Chinese had established a Roman presence in northwestern Gansu province have been exposed by the aforementioned reviewers, few historians have ventured to challenge Dubs' and Tarn's assertions that the double palisade of wood is a uniquely Roman fixture in fortifications. It would be pertinent at this point to recall one of Tarn's previous statements that he had never encountered any literary or archaeological evidence of the palisade in use by the Greeks, to which Dubs adds that the double palisade was in standard use by the Romans. Both are incorrect, as double palisades are neither unique to the Romans, nor are they even standard or common.

The assistance in engineering that Dubs insists the so-called Romans gave to Jzh-jzh in

³⁵ Schuyler Cammann, “Review: A Roman City in Ancient China” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 21, no. 3 (May, 1962): 380-382.

³⁶ Yü, *op. cit.*, 90-91.

developing his fortifications would likely have come in the form that the legionaries would have been most familiar with—marching camps. There were five methods of protection for a Roman marching camp: ditch, rampart, stakes, stockade, and lines of armed men, although the last three were to be used only if the soil is too friable for a standard ditch or rampart. The ramparts were topped by a palisade of pointed stakes or wooden caltrops; various sources suggest that the wooden stakes used for palisades would have been carried by the soldiers, but this is not always the case. In unwooded, desert conditions, it is quite likely that the Romans carried empty bags which they would fill with sand to construct the rampart.³⁷ Historians generally provide few details about the construction of the ramparts and ditches, but Polybius and Livy offer detailed descriptions of the palisades.³⁸ Livy writes:

“The Romans cut light forked stakes with three or perhaps four branches, as a general rule, so that each soldier could comfortably carry several at once, with his arms hanging on his back; and they plant them so close together and interweave the boughs so completely that it is difficult to tell to which branch each trunk is joined or to which trunk each branch belongs. Moreover, the branches are so sharp as to leave, interlaced, little space for inserting the hand, so that there is nothing that can be grasped or pulled out, since the interwoven branches bind one another together; and, if one is by chance pulled out, it leaves a small gap and is easily replaced.”³⁹

Several of the stakes lashed together at the central “grip” would serve as an effective temporary fence, which could not easily be moved but would be easy to erect. The palisade could be used as an addition to the rampart or to defend a camp without a rampart and a ditch if

³⁷ C. M. Gilliver, “The Roman Art of War: Theory and Practice. A Study of the Roman Military Writers” (Ph. D. diss., London University, 1993), 70.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁹ Livy 33.5.

the soil proved too friable for their construction.⁴⁰ In this case, Gilliver suggests that there would not likely be archaeological remains of the fortifications. The legions of M. Licinius Crassus, having crossed the Euphrates into northern Mesopotamia may very well have constructed their marching camps with ramparts of dirt and sand alone due to the lack of wood in the area sturdy enough for building palisades. Marching camps—and likewise palisades—were not unique to the Romans. Gilliver suggests that since there is an absence of conclusive evidence to the origins and introduction of the Roman marching camp, it seems likely, as with many other military procedures, the Romans adopted and adapted those procedures that may have been useful from those that they fought.⁴¹ Frontinus claims that Pyrrhus was the first general to concentrate his entire army within the same fortifications in the field; we are told the Romans adopted this mode of entrenchment following the capture of his camp at Maleventum.⁴² Pyrrhus was merely one in a line of many rulers in the Greek world to adopt such fortifications.

Contrary to Tarn's earlier statement that palisade walls were not used in Greek outworks, the earliest reference in Greek literature occurs in the Homeric description of the Achaean wall at Troy, with its outer defenses containing a ditch and a palisade.⁴³ What may have confused Tarn is the virtual lack of ditches and palisades in Greek fortifications in earlier periods, especially in early Archaic times, which Winter explains as a result of the Greeks gravitating towards naturally defensible positions. Winter adds that only where the fortified area consisted of a low promontory or a strip of coastline would a ditch and a palisade be a required measure, which

⁴⁰ Gilliver, *op. cit.*, 79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴³ Homer, *Iliad* 7.440-1.

would explain their use at Troy.⁴⁴

By the fourth century B. C., the nature of warfare and siegecraft had changed such that outer defenses were required to reduce or destroy the effectiveness of the attackers' siegeworks. The outworks of some of the Hellenistic cities were designed to meet the combined threat of siege towers, rams, artillery bombardment, and mines rather than a direct assault by enemy infantry. Philon wrote thoroughly on Hellenistic fortifications, suggesting that “it is therefore the greatest importance that the *proteichismata* and palisades be as strong as possible, and the ditches as numerous and deep as practicable.”⁴⁵ While not all Hellenistic cities were normally provided with outworks as elaborate as the ones described by Philon, Winter believes this mode of fortification was more common in the eastern kingdoms—where cities were built on fairly level ground, thus making outworks indispensable—than the Aegean and western Mediterranean.⁴⁶ Single walls of palisades were fairly commonly mentioned in literary contexts. As for the “double palisade of wood” mentioned in the description of the battle at Jzh-jzh's citadel as being a standard method of Roman fortification—it is not; multiple lines of palisades are scarcely mentioned in both Greek and Roman texts, and generally in the context of circumvallation.

Thucydides mentions the use of a double palisade by the Peloponnesians in their siege of Plataea in the late fifth century B.C.⁴⁷ In 365 B.C., the Arcadians used the same tactic in the siege of the Spartan-garrisoned town of Cromnus.⁴⁸ Three centuries later, Julius Caesar utilized circumvallation in a similar manner in the siege of Alesia in Gaul, placing his army between the

⁴⁴ Frederick E. Winter, *Greek Fortifications* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 271-272.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 273-274.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁴⁷ Thucydides, 2.75-78, 3.20-24.

⁴⁸ Xenophon, *Hellenica* 7.4.21-7.

palisades, and thus between the Gallic king Vercingetorix and his allies elsewhere in the region.⁴⁹ In the context of the battle account mentioned in *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, the double palisade clearly refers to defensive outworks constructed by the Hunnish side, and not to any circumvallation constructed by the Chinese in a siege situation, for in the account, the Chinese set fire to the palisades.⁵⁰ There is little—if any—archaeological or literary evidence to suggest the existence of Roman double palisades in the context of outer defenses for a city, but the lack of extant palisades certainly does not mean that they never existed. In any case, in his search for the answer to the “double palisade of wood” in Central Asia, Dubs should have focused more closely on fortifications in Central Asia than in Europe.

The most damaging evidence to Dubs' and Tarn's assertions of the Roman influence on Jzh-jzh's fortress in the Talas Valley is not only the refutation of the fact that consecutive walls of palisades are uniquely Roman, but also the fact that this mode of fortification was also indigenous to Central Asia. Since Tarn apparently did not concern himself with the work of Soviet archaeologists working in the region, he would not have known that the ancient Scythian inhabitants of Choresmia frequently built forts that had double walls similar to those described in the Chinese annals—one of which being Tchirik-rabat.⁵¹ Further damaging still is the Wallburg of Ivolginsk—near Irkutsk, Russia just north of the Mongolian border—known since the 1930's to have been a Hun fortress with four consecutive walls, which contradicts Dubs' statement that “the Huns were nomads who had no towns in Mongolia except a very few built by Chinese renegades.”⁵² In essence, Jzh-jzh's double palisades were far more likely to have built by his

⁴⁹ Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War* 7.68.

⁵⁰ Dubs, *A Roman City in Ancient China*, 12.

⁵¹ Raschke, *op. cit.*, 681.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 681; Dubs, *op. cit.*, 14.

own people than any foreigners who may have wound up in his military service. Even still, the phrase “fish-scale formation” in regard to men in a military formation does seem to indicate a possible foreign presence in the fort, especially since the Huns were horsemen—as were neighboring Scythians and Yüeh-chih (referred to as the Tochari in classical sources).

Conclusions

Raschke states that *A Roman City in China* is a “work of fiction of moderate interest.”⁵³ According to Cammann, Dubs “deserves credit for his efforts to broaden the outlook of both Chinese and European classical historians, but not for his conclusions, which seem quite untenable.”⁵⁴ Although the fundamental evidence of the apparent *testudo* and double palisade that Dubs utilized to assert the Romanism of the soldiers seen outside of Jzh-jzh's capital has been strongly questioned, it should not be considered a complete impossibility. The theory put forth in *A Roman City in Ancient China* is highly unlikely, but still a remotely plausible scenario. Lieberman adds: “We may well find, as Dubs believes, that even in those days the world was smaller than we think.”⁵⁵ This statement can be exhibited by the free flow of trade goods between the East and West. Silk traveled thousands of miles from China to Rome. With Central Asian nomads acting as intermediaries for carrying to ancient China material elements of Western civilization, glassware and amber believed to have been of Roman origin has been unearthed in the East, as far away as Korea.⁵⁶ Hellenistic textiles have been found in northern

⁵³ Raschke, *op. cit.*, 681.

⁵⁴ Cammann, *op. cit.*, 382.

⁵⁵ Lieberman, *op. cit.*, 211.

⁵⁶ W. Perceval Yetts, “Links Between China and the West” *Geographical Review* 16, no. 4 (Oct. 1926): 622; Yü, *op. cit.*, 198.

Mongolia.⁵⁷ Despite this, the three phases of Dubs' theory—the settlement of the remnants of Crassus' army at Margiana, the battle between the Huns and Chinese in the Talas River valley, and the establishment of a city named Li-chien in the western frontier of Han China—should all be seen as separate and unconnected events until firm archaeological evidence is presented to suggest otherwise.

It is thus impossible to know how many—if any, at all—of the legionaries were settled in Margiana, therefore it cannot be assumed that any of them traveled further east into Central Asia. Additionally, the Chinese records do not contain the origin of those people who had settled in Li-chien, or even when it was established. Cammann's suggestion that it had been established by Greek-Bactrian merchants to serve as a trading post between Chinese Turkestan and China proper seems to be the most probable explanation, but until the ancient site is located and archaeological investigations are commenced, the western nature of this town is also questionable. The meaning of the word “Li-chien” in Chinese is debated among the experts; the word has been used to denote numerous locations in Central Asia and Near East; “Ta-ts'in” has similarly been contested.⁵⁸

This debate leads one to make another conclusion—that since the Chinese had never established a direct tie with Rome, they did not know how to define its boundaries with words. Generally speaking, “Li-chien” means different things in different contexts, referring to any region west of the furthest distance the Chinese had ever traveled. Similarly, Pliny writes of Chinese who had Caucasian characteristics, but since no Romans at the time had traveled to

⁵⁷ Herwin Schaefer, “Hellenistic Textiles in Northern Mongolia” *American Journal of Archaeology* 47, no. 3 (Jul.-Sep., 1943): 266-277.

⁵⁸ The various interpretations have been presented in the fifth note of this paper. The interpretations have also been noted in Raschke, *op. cit.*, 680.

China, he is simply referring to any person living within the borders of the empire; this included not just those of Mongolic groups, but also people racially related to Europeans and/or speaking Indo-European languages, such as the Scythians or Yüeh-chih. One could liken this to referring to a person from Syria, Dacia, or Judea as a Roman simply because they live within the confines of the Roman Empire.⁵⁹ From this perspective, Zhelai Village's inhabitants may very well be descendants of “Romans”, simply because “Rome” refers to a region to the west of China proper. The philological debate aside, they are almost assuredly not descendants of Crassus' Romans.

Finally, the “fish-scale formation” noted by the Chinese can be addressed. Dubs' original supposition that the military formation was formed by Sogdian mercenaries before Tarn convinced him otherwise a few years later may have been a more plausible situation than the Roman *testudo*. Tarn states that Greek Bactria fell to the barbarians around 130 B.C., but this statement is only partially true.

A series of nomadic migrations westward beginning in northern Mongolia in the 170's B.C. had eventually found its way into Central Asia four decades later. The Huns had pushed the neighboring Yüeh-chih to the west; in return, the Yüeh-chih pushed Scythian tribes inhabiting this region across the Jaxartes River into Sogdiana. Around 130, the Yüeh-chih moved into Sogdiana, taking control of the “land of the small city-states,” as the Chinese called it. The Hellenistic leadership of Sogdiana vacated and moved into Indo-Greek territory to the south. Numismatic evidence suggests that at this point, coinage from Sogdiana lost all Hellenistic influence and began to reflect Yüeh-chih icons. Mitchiner writes that it is possible that the Yüeh-chih made raids or exacted tribute from some parts of Bactria, but there is no evidence that

⁵⁹ Samuel Lieberman, “Who Were Pliny's Blue-Eyed Chinese?” *Classical Philology* 52, no. 3 (Jul., 1957): 174-177.

they invaded south of the Oxus in their westward migration. The devastation wrought by the wave of migration on western Bactria does not apply to eastern Bactria, which retained its Indo-Greek kings and economic prosperity for more than a century.⁶⁰

It is merely conjectural to suggest that the Greek-Bactrians utilized Macedonian military tactics residual from Alexander the Great's campaigns in Central Asia three centuries earlier, but Hellenistic Indo-Greek kingdoms existed in the Hindu Kush until the end of the first century B.C., when the Indo-Scythians invaded the region.⁶¹ Thus, the “fish-scale formation” can be more easily explained by the possibility of Hellenic mercenaries in the employ of the Hun warlord Jzh-jzh already living in Central Asia rather than Roman legionaries who had once fought at Carrhae, two thousand miles away. However, since there is no archaeological or literary evidence to suggest that this is the case, it also should be considered just one of many possible explanations of the “more than a hundred” curiously aligned foot-soldiers standing outside of Jzh-jzh's characteristically Central Asian double palisade. Homer Dubs' *A Roman City in Ancient China* is a fascinating read and a highly provocative piece of historical research, but in the end, Dubs grasps at straws in drawing a connection between the two great empires of the East and West.

⁶⁰ Michael Mitchiner, *Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian Coinage* (London: Hawkins, 1976), 397.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 391.

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