

The Images of China in the Western Literature: Greco-Roman Antiquity

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Abstrak

Right up until the end of the Hellenistic era the ancient Greeks did not realise that on the far eastern side of the Asiatic continent there was a Chinese civilisation. Before knowledge of China reached the West, silk was introduced there, imported from a country inhabited by a people called the Seres (Σῆρες). We find in Strabo's Geography the oldest certain reference to the Seres, which originates in the lost history of Apollodorus of Artemita, who described the successes of the Indo-Greek rulers (200–180 BC and 155–130 BC). The real explosion of information about silk and the Seres as its producers came only at the beginning of the Augustan era, for the first time in Horace's Epodes (between 40 and 30 BC). The Seres became a popular motif in Augustan poetry; in the Georgics Virgil was the first to mention expressis verbis that the Seres were the producers of fabrics. Yet even though the appearance of silk in Augustan Rome is absolutely certain, we cannot be completely sure that contemporary Romans knew anything of China. It is highly likely that the first references to the Seres refer to people from southern India. The first certain piece of information about China is a reference in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (40–70 AD) about a country called Thin, whose capital is Thina. New observations made by travellers on overland and maritime routes were written about by Marinus of Tyre and then Claudius Ptolemy, who separated Serica, which is placed in the middle of the continent, from the country of Sinae (Σῖναι). In the third century AD the Roman Empire was experiencing an internal crisis and in China the empire of the Han dynasty was fractured into local states, so there is nothing strange in the weakening of direct trade relations between China and Rome. The book-knowledge of the ancient authors would from this point be the only source for garnering information about China in the Latin West right up until the thirteenth century.