

# Alexander the Great and the Emergence of the Silk Road\*

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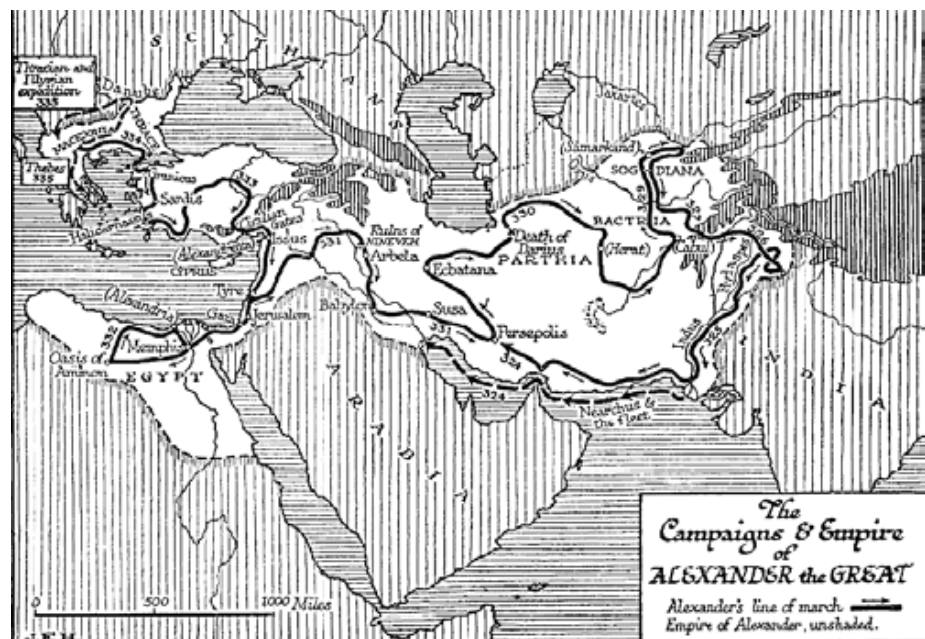
It has long been considered that the diplomatic mission of Zhang Qian, a Chinese envoy from the Former Han court to the Western Regions, played the most important role in the opening of the Silk Road. Equally important, as we emphasize in this article, were the eastward conquests of Alexander the Great [Fig. 1]. The creation of his empire and the enlargement of the Hellenistic world by him and his successors expanded communication and contacts between the Greeks and civilizations in the East and thus unintentionally prepared for the emergence of the Silk Road.

Prior to Alexander, there were certainly contacts among the main civilizations of the ancient world. Even some Greeks learned from hearsay that there was one country in the east which produced silk. The physician and historian Ctesias (5<sup>th</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) is alleged to have been the first Greek who called this country Seres.<sup>1</sup> For all the classical authors the location of the Seres was not certain, but they came to believe that it was in the Far East, and some even guessed it might be China.<sup>2</sup> The Greek historian Herodotus mentioned a brave Greek traveler, Aristaeas, who went into the East as far as the land of the Issedones (Herodotus 1920-1925, Vol. 2: 4. 13-14, 16). According to the opinions of some Chinese scholars, the land of the Issedones should be roughly in the region from the Ural Mountains eastwards to the area between the Tianshan Mountains and Altai Mountains, perhaps even reaching the Tarim Basin (塔里木盆地), Loulan (楼兰), and Dunhuang (敦煌) (Sun

1985; Pédech 1976/1983, p. 22; Wang 1986, p. 53, n. 1; Ma and Wang 1990).

Two important archeological discoveries in the last century provided unequivocal evidence of connections across Asia from China in ancient times. One was the discovery of Chinese silk in a rich Celtic tomb of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE at Halstatt in Germany (Biel 1980). The other was the excavation of Chinese silk and bronze mirrors in the Scythian tombs of the Altai Mountains in southern Siberia dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> to about the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE (Rudenko 1957). These facts prove the existence of the so-called Eurasian Steppe Road in ancient times. Since this road might often be disturbed by natural and human causes, it could not become the main channel of cultural communications between East and West.

Fig. 1. Map of Alexander the Great's conquests. Source: Florida Center for Instructional Technology, University of South Florida <<http://etc.usf.edu/maps/pages/3600/3607/3607.gif>>, from H. G. Wells, The Outline of History (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1921): 323.



As early as in the Aegean civilization, Greeks began to have contacts with Near Eastern civilizations, but it was in the period of the Persian Empire that direct, extensive contacts between Greek and Eastern civilizations really developed.

To consolidate control of his vast empire across Asia, Africa and Europe, the Achaemenid ruler Darius I built a system of roads which led in all directions. The most famous was the 2000-km-long Royal Road which started at Susa, one of the capitals of the empire, passed through Mesopotamia, and ended at Ephesus on the coast of Asia Minor. Even though the channels of communication were open in the Persian Empire,<sup>3</sup> in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE other civilizations in Eurasia, such as Rome, India and China, had not established contact with one another either because of their geographical isolation or their underdevelopment. There was as yet no link connecting the two ends of Eurasia. Forging such a link was the task fulfilled by Alexander the Great and Han Wudi (156–87 BCE), through his emissary Zhang Qian.

Alexander not only conquered the entire Persian Empire, but also added some areas to it. Although his empire fell apart after his sudden death in 323 BCE and was divided into several kingdoms, the pattern of Greek rule in the East did not change. Greek culture spread over the areas they occupied, even beyond, and the intercourse and fusion between Greek and eastern cultures intensified.

A new network of communication connecting

West and East emerged in the Hellenistic world and its neighboring areas. There were three main trade routes between India and West at the time [Fig. 2]. On the northern one goods were transported via Bactria, then along the Oxus to the Aral Sea, and from there further to the Black Sea. The middle route in fact had two tracks: one led from western India to the Persian Gulf by sea, then went up the Tigris River to Seleucia, one of the capitals of the Seleucid Kingdom; another ran by land across the Hindu Kush to Bactra in modern Afghanistan, traversed the Iranian plateau, and descended to the same city of Seleucia. From there a road went westwards across the Syrian Desert to Antioch, the other capital of the Seleucids. Then its branches turned west and southwest towards the Phoenician coast, and northwest across Asia Minor, finally to reach Ephesus on the Aegean. A southern sea route led to the Red Sea. From the head of the Red Sea at modern Aqaba a land road ran northward to Petra, Damascus, and Antioch, whilst from the Gulf of Suez the canal dredged by King Ptolemy II allowed Indian goods to be shipped across to the Nile and downriver to Alexandria. The discovery of the monsoon in the Indian Ocean around the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE made the sea route look safer and more convenient (Walbank 1981, pp. 200–204). These three routes coincided more or less with the later routes of the western section of the Silk Road. There was only one section of the later Silk Road, namely the route from the Hexi Corridor to the Pamirs, that was not yet open at the time. But this unopened section was becoming shorter and shorter as an unforeseen result of the actions of both the Greeks and the Chinese.

According to Strabo, the Greek ruler of Bactria, Euthydemus, and his son Demetrius in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE “extended their empire even as far as the Seres and the Phryni” (Strabo 1917–1932, Vol. 5: 11.11.1). At that time, the land of the Seres was still regarded by the peoples of the West as the region, however vague and hazy, where silk was produced, and not as the imperial China of the Han Dynasty. A. K. Narain has identified the Seres and the Phryni as the Sule



Fig. 2. Schematic map of early trade routes in Western Asia. Source for base map: <<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/archive/e/ed/20060603032139%>>.

(疏勒, Kashgar) and Puli (蒲犁) of the Chinese sources (Narain 1957, pp. 170-171). His viewpoint is reasonable because these two locations were precisely in the districts of Kashgar (喀什) and Tashkurgan along the eastern side of the Pamir range in today's Xinjiang province in China. Thus it appears that even before Zhang Qian arrived in Central Asia, the section of the later Silk Road to the west of the Pamirs had actually already been opened.

Moreover, the political situation and the cultural scene in the eastern Hellenistic world had changed greatly in the two centuries after the conquest by Alexander the Great. As early as the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the governor of Bactria declared his independence from the Seleucid kingdom. Following this, the Parthians revolted and founded their own kingdom. In the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, Bactrian Greeks extended their domains into the northwest of India, but within half a century they were forced to retreat there from Central Asia under the powerful pressures of Parthians and the nomads from the north.<sup>4</sup> It is certain that Bactria had already been conquered by the Dayuezhi when Zhang Qian arrived there in ca. 129–128 BCE. Zhang Qian called Bactria Daxia (大夏).

Though the territory of the Greeks in Central Asia had been greatly reduced, the influence of Hellenistic culture stretched much wider and deeper. Wherever the Greeks went far away from their homeland, they kept their tradition of founding cities or settlements and living together. It is estimated that they might have founded more than 300 cities and settlements in the East. Among them, 19 cities were in Bactria and 27 in India (Cary 1959, pp. 244-245). The existence of these cities was confirmed by the discovery of the site of Ai Khanum in Afghanistan in 1960s.

So far as Bactria and other neighboring areas were concerned, the changes of their cultural outlook were especially remarkable. According to Strabo, under the rule of Greeks, the number of cities and towns in Bactria so increased that Bactria was called "a state of one thousand cities."<sup>5</sup> Parthians adopted the calendar of the

Seleucid dynasty and issued Greek-style coins, set up the statues of Greek gods, performed Greek plays,<sup>6</sup> and even built a gymnasium in the palace.<sup>7</sup> The Indo-Greeks were influenced much more by Indian culture, as can be seen from the bilingual coins issued by some Indo-Greek kings [Fig. 3].

*Fig. 3. Bronze coins of Bactrian King Eucratides I (170-145 BCE), with Greek and Kharosthi inscriptions. Collection of the British Museum CM 1894.5-6.1030; CM 36. Photo © 2007 Daniel C. Waugh.*



It was against such a political and cultural background that Zhang Qian arrived in the former territory of the Greek Kingdom of Bactria. What, then, did he see and hear there?

According to the "Collective Biographies of Dayuan" in *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Scribe) (史記·大宛列傳), Han Wudi sent Zhang Qian twice to the Western Regions (Sima Qian 1959). In the first mission (139 or 138 to 126 BCE) he passed through four regions: Dayuan (大宛), Kangju (康居), Dayueshi (大月氏), and Daxia (outside of Xiongnu territory), and he received some hearsay information about five other large countries: Wusun (烏孫), Yancai (奄蔡), Anxi (i.e. Parthia, 安息), Tiaozhi (條支), and Shendu (i.e. India, 身毒). In the second journey (119–115 BCE) he himself went into Wusun, and from there he sent his vice-envoys to "Dayuan, Kangju, Dayueshi, Daxia, Anxi, Yutian (于寘), Hanshen (扞犂), as well as other neighboring countries." Since these areas once had been ruled and influenced by Greeks, Zhang Qian's report introduced into central China information about the Hellenistic world and provided some specific evidence about the remains of Hellenistic culture.

According to Zhang Qian, many walled cities and houses had been built in Dayuan, Anxi,

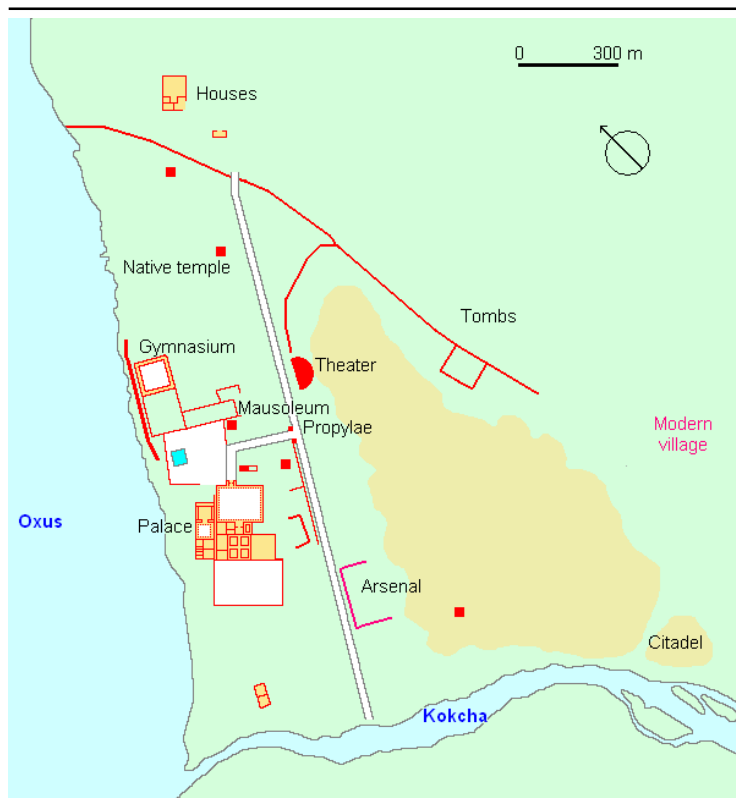


Fig. 4. Plan of Ai Khanum. Copyright © 2006 Jona Lendering <[http://www.livius.org/a/1/maps/ai\\_khanum\\_map.gif](http://www.livius.org/a/1/maps/ai_khanum_map.gif)>.

even more exaggerated. But the site of Ai Khanum in Afghanistan beside the river Oxus directly illustrates that at least some cities and towns had Greek features [Fig. 4].<sup>8</sup> The finds at the site, such as Greek statuary, Corinthian capitals [Fig. 5], coins, a gymnasium, a theater, and a Greek inscription of maxims and philosophical texts [Fig. 6, facing page], confirm the existence of a Greek-style city that was over 5000 km. distant from Greece. Having toured through these cities and towns left by the Bactrian Greeks, Zhang Qian must have felt that he was entering a wholly different world from that of central China.

In these regions, not only grain (rice and wheat) was produced but also the grapevine was planted, and especially good wine was made and preserved. According to Strabo's account, Greeks were the first to introduce the new

and Daxia. The sudden appearance of such numerous cities and towns must have been related directly to Greek city-building activities. If the number of the cities and towns reported by Zhang Qian seems hard to believe, what Strabo said ("a state of a thousand cities") is



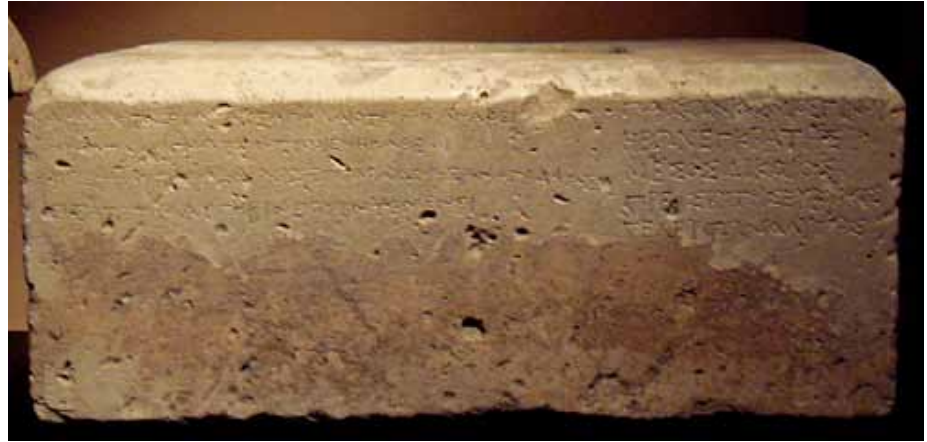
Fig. 5. Corinthian capital from Ai Khanum. Source: <<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9c/CapitalSharp.jpg>>.

viniculture into Western and Central Asia (Strabo 1917-1932, Vol. 7: 15.3.11). He noted in particular that the land of Aria (bordering on Bactria) was "exceedingly productive of wine, which keeps well for three generations in vessels" (Strabo 1917-1932, Vol. 5: 11.10.1-2). Similar evidence can be found in *Shiji*. According to its source, wine was one of the special products of Anxi, Dayuan and other areas. The winemaking was so productive that the rich men even stored more than ten thousand *Dan* of it (roughly 300,000 liters or kg.), and the wine would keep well for several decades. The similarity between the records of Strabo and Sima Qian is not a coincidence, but a real reflection of the historical development of viniculture in these regions. With Zhang Qian's return, viniculture was introduced into central China for the first time. The Greek name for grape, βότρυς (botrus) might have been transliterated into Chinese as *putao* (蒲陶).<sup>9</sup>

The political system in these countries, the same as in other Hellenistic kingdoms, was monarchy or kingship, but it appears that the aristocrats, local principals and chiefs of cities, could play important roles at key moments. For



Fig. 6. Greek inscription containing the Delphic maxims, from Ai Khanum. Source: <<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/39/KineasInscriptionSharp.jpg>>.



example, the aristocrats (貴人) of Dayuan could collectively decide to refuse to contribute the precious horses (*Hanxuema*, 汗血馬, blood-sweating horse) to the Han dynasty, attack and kill Chinese envoys, and even murder their own king (毋寡).<sup>10</sup> Such evidence suggests a hypothesis that in Dayuan there was a political institution similar to the court councils in the other Hellenistic monarchies.

According to Zhang Qian, there were many marketplaces in Daxia and Anxi. The discovery of numerous Greek-style coins from this period indicates the extensive use of coinage for trade in the Hellenistic kingdoms and surrounding areas [Fig. 7].<sup>11</sup> As Zhang Qian observed, these coins were very different from Chinese coins of the time: "The coin was made of silver with the face-image of the king on the obverse. As soon as the king died, the coin had to be changed immediately. The face-image of the new king would appear on the new coin." Clearly the

Fig. 7. A coin similar to, if somewhat later than, one Zhang Qian may have seen. Silver tetradrachm of Parthian King Artabanos I, 126-122 BCE, minted at Seleuceia on the Tigris, dated 125/4 BCE. The reverse shows Tyche seated, holding a cornucopia and Nike. Photo copyright © Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. <<http://www.cngcoins.com>>, published with permission.



coins of Daxia and Anxi were similar to those of the Hellenistic kingdoms.

In the report about Anxi, Zhang Qian provided additional very important, but usually unnoticed, evidence of Hellenistic culture, namely that the people of Anxi wrote their records horizontally on leather (畫革旁行，以爲書記). This might surprise Zhang Qian, because in the time of the former Han Dynasty Chinese generally wrote vertically from top to bottom on bamboo and wood slips. Of course, the use of leather as material for writing had appeared long before. However, the term "parchment" (*pergamenum* in Medieval Latin) derived from the name of another Hellenistic kingdom, "Pergamum." It was said that the king of Pergamum had invented parchment (Pliny 1938-1963, Vol. 4: 13.21). Possibly though the people of Pergamum only improved the process of parchment-making and created a new, higher quality kind of parchment. Anxi must have acquired parchment from Pergamum. Zhang Qian probably saw parchment as well as Greek script written on it in Daxia.

To sum up, it was Zhang Qian who brought information about Hellenistic culture into central China and whose adventures in the western regions marked the opening of the whole Silk Road, but the key role played by Alexander the Great should not be ignored. Although he had no idea that was what he was doing, through the founding of his empire and its extension of the Hellenistic world he paved the way for Zhang Qian and the other later travelers on the Silk Road.

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## About the author

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## Notes

\* This is a condensed version of a paper presented at "The Symposium of Japan, Korea, and China" in Tokyo, September 20-24, 2007, which has appeared in English in the conference proceedings.

1. Ctesias once served at the court of Persia, where he probably heard of the Seres. The veracity of his material has been doubted by western scholars such as Henry Yule and George Coedès, and the Chinese scholar Zhang Xinglang (Yule 1913-1916, Vol. 1, p. 14; Coedès 1910/2001, pp. 1-2; Zhang 1977, p. 17). Yule especially pointed out that the name appears only in the *Bibliotheca* of Photius. But the Greek word Seres was already known in Ctesias' time.

2. See also Coedès 1910/2001, pp. 1-54, 71-2. Having analyzed the related materials, Yule came to the same conclusion (Yule 1913-1916, Vol. 1, pp. 14-15).

3. The Persian army invading Greece in 480 BCE came from all the satrapies of the Empire, and some of them even from far-away Bactria and India. Thus the important role of the Royal Roads should be evident.

4. Parthia once seized a part of Bactria in the reigns of Eucratides (c. 175-145 BCE) and his successors

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(Strabo 1917–1932, Vol. 5: 11. 9. 2; 11.11. 2).

5. According to Strabo, at any rate, Eucratides, king of the Bactrians, held a thousand cities as his subjects. His information came from the *Parthica* of Apollodorus (Strabo 1917–1932, Vol. 7: 15. 1.3).

6. According to Plutarch, when the head of the Roman general Crassus, killed in the battle of Carrhae in 53 BCE, was sent to the palace of the Parthian king, a tragedy of Euripides, *The Bacchae*, was being performed. This shows that the Greek language was in vogue in the upper-class society of Parthia. Plutarch also mentions especially one of the guests who was present, Artarvasdes, king of Armenia, who could not only enjoy the Greek poems and plays with the master of the banquet, Hyrodes or Orodes, King of Parthia, but could himself write tragedies, orations and history in Greek (Plutarch 1914–1926, Vol. 3: Crassus, 33). The wide spread of the Greek language and the deep penetration of Hellenistic culture can thus be clearly seen.

7. The features of Hellenistic culture in Parthia are also treated in Fox 1975, pp. 492, 493, and Wiesenhöfer 1996, pp. 124–9.

8. For an excellent, lavishly illustrated essay on Ai Khanum, see Bernard 2008; for a reconstruction of the appearance of the city, see Lecuyot 2007.

9. According to Sima Qian, “the envoys of the Han Dynasty brought the seeds of the grapevine and purple medic back into Central China. So the emperor of Wudi (Tianzi, the son of heaven, 天子) began to plant them in the lands of fertility. The number of Horses of Heaven (天馬) was becoming more and more and many foreign envoys came to the capital, so that

the grapevine and purple medic were planted widely by the side of summer palaces and other buildings” (Sima Qian 1959). Regarding the transliteration of βότρυς into Chinese, see Liddell and Scott 1996, “βότρυς”, p.323; Chavannes 1896/1995, Chapter 8, p. 7. According to Paul Pelliot, while this explanation had been put forward by Ritter and confirmed by Kingsmill and Hirth, he himself doubted it (Pelliot 1920/1995, Chapter 5, pp. 82–83). Another sceptic was the American scholar Berthold Laufer (Laufer 1919/2001, pp. 49–51), some of whose conclusions in his book first published in 1919 are wrong or in need of revision.

10. The name “Wugua” seems to be the transliteration of the eulogy title “ΜΕΓΑΣ”(Megas) of kings that appeared in the legends on Hellenistic coins. Coins of one Kushan period ruler did not name the king but used only the title “ΣΩΤΗΡ ΜΕΓΑΣ” (Soter Megas). Obviously Megas could have been understood as the king’s name. Whether “Wugua” of *The Records of the Grand Scribe* was just the transliteration of Megas is uncertain.

11. Since the first coin of the Greek king of Bactria, Eucratides (ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΕΥΚΡΑΤΙΔΟΥ) was discovered, numerous Greek-style coins have been unearthed in this area. The largest hoard was discovered at the tiny village, Nir Zakah, in Afghanistan. An estimated 550,000 coins have made the journey from there to Japan, Europe, and America. This single hoard is almost six times larger than the total of all ancient hoards recorded throughout the territories of Greece and Macedonia (Holt 2005, pp. 125–148).

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