

## Silk, The Seres, And The Greco-Roman World

In the *Georgics* (2.121), Vergil wrote how people called the Seres were able to create a fabric from leaves. This is the first documentation in ancient literature of the process of making silk, although the technique was hardly understood. Vergil's younger contemporary Strabo (15.1.20) wrote about "the material of the Serika", again a fabric, but also with no real sense of context. At roughly the same time, Cleopatra VII was said to wear fabric made from material produced by the Seres (Lucan 10.142).

Who, then, were these mysterious Seres who so captured Greek and Roman imagination in the late first century BC? They lived in some remote place and were connected with producing a fabric that quickly came to be valued in the Mediterranean world. "Seres" is always an ethnic name, not a product, although the distinction between people and product could easily become obscured.

Knowledge of the Seres first came to the Greek world at the end of the fourth century BC. Alexander the Great may have had some vague awareness about them (Nearchos F19), but the first detailed report was from Megasthenes, who spent several years at the Mauryan court at Pataliputra on the Ganges, around 300 BC, and wrote a four-book treatise, *Indika*, on what he had learned. But to Megasthenes the Seres were merely traders in silk who came to Pataliputra (Strabo, *Geography* 5.1.20). They could not be the Chinese, because the earliest description of them, from the early first century AD, reports that they were of large stature with blue eyes and red hair (Pliny, *Natural History* 6.88; Lieberman 1957: 174-7). Clearly the Seres were Central Asian traders who came to Pataliputra, bringing silk with them, and who came to be known as

the Silk People, using an hellenized local version of the Chinese word for silk, *si*, which became confused with the traders themselves as an ethnic name.

Until the first century AD no one from the Mediterranean had been to China, and no one from China had been to the Mediterranean (Ferguson 1978: 581-603). But the existence of long-distance trade meant that it was possible for Chinese silk to come over a trade route to the Mediterranean world. By the middle of the century it was known that silk came from a place called Thina, a great inland city, the most remote place in the world, literally at the ends of the earth. This is clearly a linguistically related metonym for China (*Periplus of the Erythraian Sea* 64; Casson 1989: 238). Traders from China would come in a series of stages to a great rendezvous point in Central Asia called the Stone Tower, where a route went south to India. By late in the century the connection was made over a direct route from the Mediterranean to the Stone Tower. The implementor was a merchant named Maes Titianus (Ptolemy, *Geography* 1.11.7; Andrade 2015: 41-74). He probably lived in one of the eastern Mediterranean trading centers such as Antioch or Sidon, and sent his people to the land of the Seres, far to the east. They recorded the distances that they travelled, providing the first report of such data on the route to the Seres, especially its eastern portions. In a journey taking several months, Maes' agents went from some unspecified point in the Mediterranean world first to the Stone Tower, and then from the Stone Tower over exceedingly rough country to the land of the Seres (Heil and Schulz 2015: 72-84). They were astute enough to calculate the latitude of the capital of the Seres, and found it was the same as Rhodes, which suggests the contemporary Chinese capital of Luoyang. The establishment of this route--which later came to be called the Silk Road--extending over 10,000 km., was the longest trade route in antiquity. A thousand years later Marco Polo was to follow it on his way to China.

Silk became one of the major import products of the ancient world. Not only Cleopatra, but Gaius Caligula and others luxuriated in the it; in the time of Tiberius there were attempts to restrict its usage (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.33). But the silkworm never made it to Mediterranean until late antiquity; raw silk fabric came over the Silk Road and was processed into clothing in production centers such as Sidon in Phoenicia.

### Bibliography

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