

A ROMAN CITY IN ANCIENT CHINA¹

By H. H. DUBS

IT is a very remarkable fact that, in the register of Chinese cities and counties for the year A.D. 5, there should appear a city and county with the most ancient Chinese name for Rome. The Chinese, then as now, did not give *foreign* names to their cities. In that list, with its over 1,500 cities, there are only two other Chinese places with foreign names. We know that both those localities were populated by immigrants who came from those places *outside* China. It follows that people from the Roman Empire must have emigrated to China and founded this city.

But such a conclusion appears impossible. Between ancient China and the Roman Empire, along what has since been well named the Silk Road, there stretched more than 4,000 miles of often inhospitable territory, with deserts and high mountains. Athwart this road was the great Parthian Empire. This country was the bitterest of Rome's enemies and Rome never succeeded in subduing it. The Parthians effectively blocked the Silk Road and would never have allowed any free Romans to cross their empire. The tribes between Parthia and China usually allowed caravans of traders to pass, but they would have prevented any mass migration of strange people.

This city with the Chinese name for Rome was located south of the present Yung-ch'ang, a place in the long north-westward extension of Gan-su (or Kansu) Province. It did not yet exist in 79 B.C. The first mention of this city is in the Chinese register of A.D. 5. There is also supplied the name given to this city by the usurper Wang Mang, who adopted the Confucian doctrine of 'rectifying names', i.e., of giving to everything the name most appropriate to it. This city he renamed Jie-lu, a phrase which can mean two things: 'caitiffs [captured] in taking [a place] by storm' and 'caitiffs raised up'. Did the Chinese, then, make prisoners of some Roman legionaries and settle them in a city near the western Chinese border, to act as border guards?

The ancient Chinese name for this city was Li-jien. This name was used by the Chinese for Rome and the Roman Empire. Later there was

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used for Rome the name Da-ts'in, and Chinese authorities equate these two names. This name, Li-jien, was a Chinese transcription and abbreviation of the Greek name 'Alexandria', and originally denoted the Alexandria in Egypt. The Chinese could not distinguish between Rome and Alexandria.

Between 110 and 100 B.C. there arrived at the Chinese capital an embassy from the king of Parthia. Among the presents for the Chinese emperor there are stated to have been 'fine jugglers from Li-jien'. Now the jugglers and dancers, male and female, from Alexandria were famous in the Roman world. We know they were exported to foreign countries. When these persons were asked by the Chinese whence they came, they of course replied, 'From Alexandria', which word the Chinese naturally shortened to Li-jien and used to denote that part of the world.

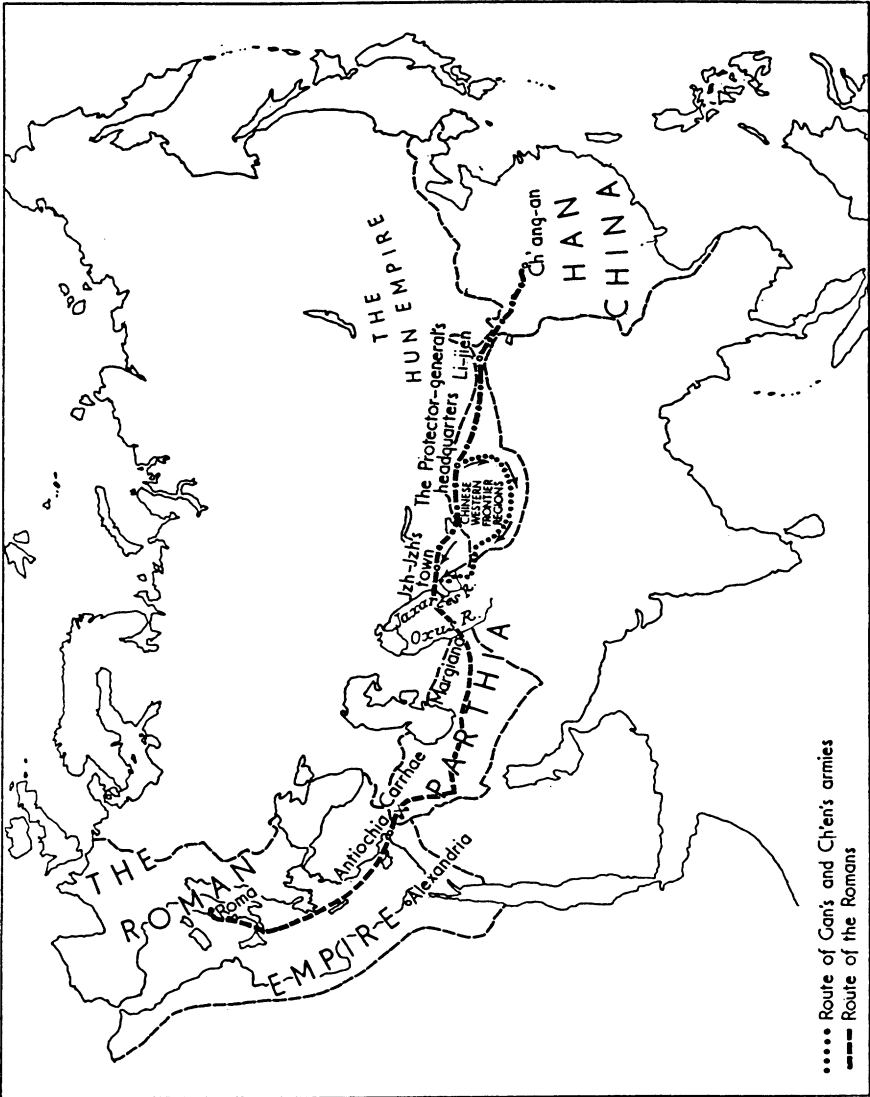
We must now turn to the remarkable series of historical events, both in the Roman Empire and in the Chinese area, which eventually brought these two ends of the Eurasian continent into contact.

In 60 B.C., at Rome, Pompey was granted a triumph by the Roman Senate. But when he came to Rome as a private citizen he found himself politically helpless. Caesar and Crassus came to his relief, forming the First Triumvirate. Caesar became consul in 59, Pompey and Crassus in 55. The latter was thereafter made the proconsul of Syria.

To the triumvirate Crassus contributed the very large sums of money which the other two lacked but needed greatly for their plans. The one thing he altogether lacked and wanted most was military glory—which was what Romans esteemed most highly. After he reached Syria he accordingly embarked, against the advice of his best generals, upon a war with the Parthians. In 54 B.C. he marched into Parthian territory with 42,000 men. The Parthians met him at Carrhae. Their army was composed chiefly of mounted archers, who surrounded the Romans and kept up a deadly stream of arrows. The Parthians on horse-back retired before the charges of the Roman foot, shooting over the rumps of their horses, and the Romans were helpless. The legionaries could merely form a square and protect themselves by locking their shields all about the square, making the typically Roman formation called the *testudo*. But the Parthians shot over and below the Roman shields and massacred the Romans with little danger to themselves. By nightfall 20,000 men were slain and 10,000 were made prisoners. Scarcely one-fourth escaped in the night and reached Syria.

We know little of what happened to these prisoners. Pliny states that they were moved to Margiana, to guard the eastern frontier of Parthia.¹

¹ *H.N.* vi. 47.



The Roman and Chinese empires with Parthia in the first century B.C.

This was the region in central Asia containing the present Merv. How many of the 10,000 reached this place we are not told. The distance from Carrhae to Antioch in Margiana is more than 1,500 miles, and captives would hardly have been treated kindly on such a march. Our information ends here. In an ode Horace guessed that these Romans married barbarian women and served in the Parthian armies.¹

We must now turn to the Chinese scene. In the first century B.C. the present Mongolia was occupied by the Huns, who regularly raided the Chinese. Their emperor was called the *Ch'an-yü*, or *Shan-yü*. When, in 60 B.C., their *Shan-yü* died, a disputed succession led altogether eight claimants to set themselves up as *Shan-yü*. Soon all had been eliminated but two: *Shan-yü* Hu-han-sie and his elder half-brother, Jzh-jzh (pronounced with *j* as in 'judge' and *zh* like the *z* in 'azure'). When Jzh-jzh defeated Hu-han-sie in battle, the latter sought help from the Chinese and sent his son to the Chinese emperor as an attendant. The Chinese practice was to keep at the Chinese court a son of an allied foreign prince, partly as a hostage for his father's good behaviour and partly to indoctrinate him with the Chinese culture and power. Jzh-jzh likewise sent his son to the Chinese court. Then Hu-han-sie politely asked permission to come in person to the great annual New Year's Chinese court and acknowledge his fealty. He was received with great pomp. Emperor Süan, with great wisdom, treated the *Shan-yü* as a guest and ranked him, as an emperor, above the Chinese kings and other dignitaries. The *Shan-yü* was given rich presents, and, after two months, was escorted back to inner Mongolia, where he was allowed to occupy certain outlying Chinese forts. The Chinese could afford to pay highly for his protection against Hun raids on the Chinese border. During the course of some years the Chinese sent Hu-han-sie altogether 20,000 bushels of grain for his followers, whereby he was able to attract a large Hun following.

Jzh-jzh now feared his rival, left Mongolia, went west, and tried to ally himself with the Wu-sun, who were perhaps the Cossacks or the Kirghiz. They, however, killed Jzh-jzh's envoy, and sent this man's head to the Chinese. Jzh-jzh succeeded in surprising and defeating a Wu-sun army. But he could not conquer them, and so went north and conquered a large kingdom in the present western Siberia. A thousand miles of steppe were no great distance for Huns to travel, any more than for the Mongols and other steppe horsemen.

There Jzh-jzh thought he would be safe. He now sent a letter to the Chinese court, asking to have returned to him his hostage son. A major of the Chinese palace guard, Gu Ji (Chinese surnames come first, as in

¹ *Odes* iii. 5. 4-8.

Hungary) was duly deputed to escort the son. But when he reached Jzh-jzh's court, the Hun had Gu Ji and his men slaughtered.

Meanwhile Sogdiana, then an independent kingdom to the south, was suffering much from raids by the Wu-sun. Jzh-jzh's reputation as a fighter was high, and the king of Sogdiana invited him to settle in the eastern borders of this country, where Jzh-jzh would have a richer territory than in the cold north and could protect Sogdiana from the Wu-sun. Jzh-jzh feared both Hu-han-sie and the Chinese, and so was delighted with this new proposal. A pact was made. Sogdiana sent several thousand camels, asses, and horses. On the way, however, the caravans suffered from a cold spell, and only about 3,000 Huns arrived safely in Sogdiana.

The king welcomed and treated Jzh-jzh very respectfully, making an alliance with him, and giving him his daughter to wife. Jzh-jzh likewise gave his daughter to the king of Sogdiana. Jzh-jzh now advanced deeply into Wu-sun territory, killing and enslaving the Wu-sun, and driving off their cattle and sheep. The Wu-sun had to retreat, leaving 300 miles of their western territory unoccupied.

Thereupon Jzh-jzh became so proud that he broke with the king of Sogdiana, killing that king's daughter and several hundred of his men. He now built for himself a fortified capital on the Du-lai river. It was almost certainly the present River Talass, one of the streams that loses itself in the desert between the Jaxartes and Lake Balkash. But the Silk Road ran across the River Talass, and the Chinese learned of the new town. They had, west of China proper, an official, entitled the Protector-General of the Western Frontier Regions, with a highly trained mobile force of Chinese troops. The petty kingdoms in that region had engaged to send auxiliary troops to the Protector-General when called upon by the Chinese emperor.

In 38 B.C. there went out to the Western Frontier Regions two young men, Gan Yen-shou as Protector-General and Ch'en T'ang as his Associate. Gan Yen-shou came of a good family and had a blameless record. Ch'en T'ang was ambitious, brave, and full of stratagems, but not very scrupulous.

He saw the danger in Jzh-jzh's plan of developing a large empire in central Asia. He knew that, with the help of native auxiliaries, the Chinese troops at the command of the Protector-General could overcome Jzh-jzh. If they waited until the Hun had made himself secure, it might be too late. His superior, Gan Yen-shou, agreed, but said he must first secure the central government's approval for any expedition. Ch'en T'ang, however, pointed out that such a request would bring

bureaucratic delays and that the parsimonious imperial court would find such an expedition too expensive. Just then Gan Yen-shou fell ill.

The temptation was too great for Ch'en T'ang. He boldly forged an imperial order commanding the vassal states to send auxiliaries, and ordered the colonel of the Chinese troops to come to the Protector-General's headquarters for the expedition. When Gan Yen-shou's health improved and he learned of his subordinate's action, he was aghast and declared that it must be stopped. But the really dangerous act, the capital crime of forging an imperial order, had been done and could not be undone. So, partly by threats and partly by arguments, Ch'en T'ang persuaded his superior to accept the chance of deathless glory. When a force of 40,000 men had collected, Gan Yen-shou and Ch'en T'ang sent eastward to the imperial court a document accusing themselves of having forged an imperial edict and of collecting imperial troops. On the same day, in the autumn of 36 B.C., they started westwards, where no countermanding order could reach them.

Half the force was to go south of the Taklamakan Desert. The other half, under Gan Yen-shou and Ch'en T'ang, skirted the north of that desert, passed through Wu-sun territory to Lake Issik-köl, and then went west. When they entered Sogdiana, Ch'en T'ang made a secret agreement with some Sogdian nobles who hated Jzh-jzh, thus securing vital information about Jzh-jzh's circumstances.

The account of the town's capture in the Chinese narrative is plainly in the form of eight scenes. This account must have been taken from paintings depicting the capture, with labels identifying persons and actions, as in ancient Chinese pictures. Instead of translating the original passage, I here give a summary of that account by the Chinese historian, Ban Gu.

The first scene was of the Chinese camp, with the *Shan-yü's* capital town at a distance of about a mile. On the wall of the latter are mounted coloured banners, with armed men shouting, 'Come and fight!' Outside the wall horsemen gallop about, and more than a hundred foot-soldiers are lined up on either side of a gate in a fish-scale formation.

In the second scene the Hun cavalry is galloping up to the Chinese camp, where the Chinese await them with cocked and loaded crossbows, before which the Hun cavalry retreat.

In the third scene the Chinese army, urged on by its battle drums, is surrounding the city on all sides, sheltering behind its large shields, and shooting at the cavalry and foot outside the city, who are retreating behind the city wall. Some are shooting at the defenders in the towers inside the town, and the defenders come down for shelter. But from a double wooden palisade outside the town the defenders shoot and kill many of the attackers, and so the Chinese set fire to this palisade.

In the fourth scene the *Shan-yü* has donned his armour, ascended a tower with his consort and several tens of his ladies. All are shooting at the Chinese. But the attackers have hit the *Shan-yü* in the nose. Many of the women are killed. The *Shan-yü* is also shown having descended from the tower, mounted on a horse, and summoning those inside his palace to fight.

In scene five it is after midnight. The palisade has burned down and the remaining defenders are fleeing into the city. Some have mounted the wall and are shouting loudly. Outside the city and around the Chinese camp there are large groups of Sogdian cavalry. Some are charging up to the Chinese and being repulsed.

In the sixth scene it is dawn. On all sides of the camp fire is bursting forth. The Chinese officers and men are shouting wildly and the noise of their bells and drums is shaking the earth. The Sogdian cavalry, frightened, is fleeing.

In the seventh scene the Chinese and allied troops are advancing upon the city under the cover of their large shields on all sides. Some have already entered. The *Shan-yü*, with more than a hundred men and women, is flying into his wooden palace.

In the eighth and final scene the Chinese have set fire to the palace and are vying with one another in their efforts to enter it. Some have entered, and, in a hand-to-hand fight, have mortally stabbed the *Shan-yü*. His head is cut off by a Chinese captain.

We must now note carefully some of the details in this account. First of all, there is the statement, in the first scene, that there were 'more than a hundred foot-soldiers, lined up on either side of the gate in a fish-scale formation'. This term, a 'fish-scale formation', *yü-lin-jen*, is unique in all Chinese literature. A high degree of training and discipline would have been required to achieve an array so well patterned that it would be likened to fish-scales. Certainly no nomadic people, such as the Huns or any uncivilized peoples, could have achieved it. Nomads and barbarians, like the Gauls, rushed to battle in a confused mass. A well-patterned array can be achieved only by long-trained men, such as professional soldiers.

Could these men have been Greeks? The Greeks had left Bactria almost a century previously. The Macedonian phalanx, moreover, carried small round shields, about a foot and a half in diameter. Men bearing them could hardly have crowded closely enough together to appear like fish-scales.

But at this time Roman legionaries were within walking distance. They had made their living by fighting. They would have been attracted to a famous warrior who promised to become a rival of the hated Parthians. It was something like 400 to 500 miles from the Parthian border on the Oxus to Jzh-jzh's capital on the River Talass, and eighteen years from the date of Crassus' defeat to the time when the Chinese saw

men lined up in front of Jzh-jzh's town in a typically Roman formation, the *testudo*, which was employed by no other troops. The tops of the rectangular Roman *scuta*, which were rounded in front, when held up by a row of soldiers side by side and portrayed from above in the typical Chinese perspective, would indeed look like fish-scales to a person who had never seen such a formation. There is no weapon except the Roman *scutum* and no arrangement except the Roman *testudo* that would account for the Chinese historian's description.

The presence of Romans at Jzh-jzh's town is confirmed by the double wooden palisade which the Chinese found outside the city wall. The Greeks used no palisades outside city walls, but the Romans regularly used them to strengthen their ditches, especially before gates. Where there was a bridge over water, there might be stockades built out from either bank above or below the bridge. So Jzh-jzh evidently had Roman engineering assistance in building his defences.

In their report to the emperor, Gan Yen-shou and Ch'en T'ang stated that they had killed 1,500 persons, including Jzh-jzh's consort, his heir, nobles, and others, had taken alive 145 captives, and had accepted the surrender of more than a thousand others, who were divided up as slaves among the fifteen states sending auxiliaries with the Chinese troops. When we compare the number taken alive, 145 men, with the number stated to have made a fish-scale formation outside Jzh-jzh's town, which is 'more than a hundred', we can hardly make a mistake in equating them. These 145 Roman legionaries had not surrendered, but had merely stopped fighting when their employer had been killed. They had probably remained in formation, a formidable body of fighting men. They may indeed have chosen freely to go with the Chinese. In China the Romans were accordingly placed in a specially created frontier city, to which the Chinese of course gave their name for Rome, which was Li-jien. This name among the list of Chinese counties, and the implication from Wang Mang's naming that it was inhabited by men who had been secured in storming a city and were raised up, are together quite enough to demonstrate that Romans had indeed arrived in China.

Further evidence of Roman influence is to be found in the circumstance that the report of this expedition to the imperial court included pictures of the attack. In the account of this victory to be found in the annalistic chapter of the Chinese *History* we read moreover, the following statement: in February 35 B.C., 'because *Shan-yü* Jzh-jzh had been executed, . . . a feast was held [by the emperor] and the charts and documents concerning [*Shan-yü* Jzh-jzh] were shown [even] to the honoured ladies in the [imperial] harem.'

Now the statement that 'charts and documents' should have been shown to the imperial ladies is quite unprecedented. What kind of articles were they, that they should have been interesting to the ladies? Maps, memorials to the throne, and similar documents were surely not the kind of things that would be sought by the ladies of the imperial harem! Few of these ladies could read; and documents of this sort were then much too precious to be toyed with by women. There must have been pictures of this victory—a conclusion made certain by Ban Gu's account of the battle in the form of depicted scenes.

There is today ample evidence to show that in the Former Han period China possessed a highly developed art of painting. It was the practice of Chinese generals traversing previously little-known routes to have maps made of their route. A map of the road to Sogdiana would have required a long cloth roll (paper had not yet been invented), with pictures of the scenery along the way. On it there would have been abundant space for other pictures.

Chinese paintings of the Former Han period—we have descriptions of many such—dealt only with famous people, moral tales, and legends. Except for Ch'en T'ang's report we know of no representation of a contemporary event. These pictures of the assault upon Jzh-jzh's town are unprecedented in Chinese painting. They indicate a new influence in Chinese art.

The use of pictures in a Roman triumph is, however, well known. When Ch'en T'ang talked with the leader of the Roman troop, this man would have described the Roman triumphal celebration. Some of these Romans had probably participated in Pompey's triumph of 60 B.C. Concerning the triumphs of Vespasian and Titus, Josephus says: 'The war was shown by numerous representations, in separate sections, affording a very vivid picture of its episodes.'¹ These descriptions of the Roman practice agree well with the nature of the pictures Ch'en T'ang placed on the map of his route. This account is, moreover, the only vivid description of a battle to be found in all of Ban Gu's long history.

So, in 36 B.C., Ch'en T'ang met, in central Asia, a hundred and more of Crassus' Roman legionaries and brought them back to China with him. The Chinese account of that expedition describes their military formation in a phrase found nowhere else in all Chinese literature, which fits only the *testudo*, a formation used only by Roman troops. The Hun town besieged by the Chinese was defended by a double palisade, a feature not used by the Chinese or Greeks, but frequently employed by the Romans. The practice of representing by paintings scenes in a

¹ *Bell. Iud.* vii. 5. 5.

military campaign, used by the Romans in their triumphs but unknown in China, formed part of the report of that Chinese expedition. More evidential than any other circumstance, between 79 B.C. and A.D. 5 there was founded in China a city and county with the Chinese name for Rome, Li-jien, which name indicates that it must have been populated by people from the Roman Empire.

This Roman city in China existed until A.D. 746, when the Tibetans overran that part of China. A century earlier, a great Chinese scholar writing at the Chinese capital, Ch'ang-an, in the west of China, speaks of the peculiar pronunciation for this place-name used by people of that city. He says that these people run together the two words in its Chinese name and pronounce it something like *liakh-ghian*. They probably pronounced the *x* in 'Alexandria', which is unpronounceable in Chinese. So Rome, too, contributed to the mixed race inhabiting modern China.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

- SHELAGH M. BOND: Honorary Assistant Archivist of St. George's Chapel, Windsor; founder of the Northamptonshire Branch of the Classical Association, 1951.
- H. H. DUBS: Fellow of University College and Professor of Chinese, Oxford; author of *Hsuntze, the Moulder of Ancient Confucianism* (1927) and *Rational Induction: an Analysis of the Method of Philosophy and Science* (1930); translator of the works of Hsuntze (1928) and *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, by Pan Ku (1938-55).
- A. W. GOMME, F.B.A.: Professor of Greek, University of Glasgow, 1946-57; President of the Hellenic Society and editor of the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*; publications include *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, vols. i-iii (1945-56).
- H. H. HUXLEY: Senior Lecturer in Latin, University of Manchester.
- L. G. POCKOCK, M.C.: Professor of Classics, Canterbury University College, N.Z., 1938-55; author of *The Landfalls of Odysseus* (1955) and *The Sicilian Origin of the Odyssey* (1957).
- F. H. STUBBINGS: Fellow of Emmanuel College and University Lecturer in Classics, Cambridge; has published *Mycenaean Pottery from the Levant* (1951).
- RONALD SYME, F.B.A.: Fellow of Brasenose College and Camden Professor of Ancient History, Oxford; author of *The Roman Revolution* (1939) and chapters in the *Cambridge Ancient History*.
- ANNE M. I. VANNAN: Undergraduate of Queen Mary College, University of London.